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Resistance and Repression: Transformations of the Woman,
Life, Freedom Movement in Iran

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Danksagung

Als Student:in und Forscher:in zu arbeiten, kann ein einsamer Prozess sein. Letztendlich recherchiert, liest, exzerpiert, paraphasiert, analysiert und interpretiert man viel alleine, manchmal in der Bibliothek, manchmal aus dem Schlaf- oder Arbeitszimmer heraus. Bei mir war es vor allem Letzteres.

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Den Schluss meiner Danksagung möchte ich im Rahmen einer Zeile eines alten iranischen Liedes allen Menschen, die in autoritären politischen Systemen Widerstand leisten, widmen. Es heißt „مرغ سحر“, auf Deutsch „Vogel der Morgendämmerung“ und ist ein altes iranisches Protestlied aus dem Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts. Es wurde von verschiedenen Interpreten gesungen.

*O flügellose Nachtigall,
brich aus dem Gefängnis aus,
singe von der Freiheit des Menschen,
und setze die Welt mit deinem Atem in Brand.*

بلبل پر بسته ز کنج قفس درآ
نغمه آزادی نوع بشر سرا
وز نفسی عرصه این خاک توده را
پُرشرر کن

Abstract (EN)

The focus of this study is to examine how protest repertoires of social movements in authoritarian systems change in response to state repression. Specifically, it examines how the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement in Iran adapted its repertoires of resistance following the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in 2022. Based on qualitative social research, the study combines an extensive literature review with five semi-structured interviews conducted with four activists and one expert. This analysis draws on theories of „Contentious Politics“ (Tilly & Tarrow 2015; Johnston 2018), „Everyday Resistance" (Scott 1990), „Social Non-movements“ (Bayat 2010) and „A Feminist Theory of Refusal“ (Honig 2021) to examine the adaptation of resistance in the context of authoritarian constraint in the Global South.

The results of this study show that even though violence and surveillance have become more severe, the movement's resistance has not vanished. Instead, it has changed into adaptive, decentralized and relational practices. Protesters have moved from large protests to small acts of defiance, digital activism and informal networks of care and support. Political action was sustained through practices such as refusing to wear the hijab and creating informal support networks.

Abstract (DE)

Gegenstand dieser Arbeit ist die Frage, wie sich Protestrepertoires von sozialen Bewegungen in autoritären Systemen im Zuge von staatlichen Repressionsmaßnahmen verändern. Konkret wurde hierbei analysiert, wie die Frau, Leben, Freiheit, Bewegung im Iran ihre Widerstandsrepertoires nach dem Tod von Jina (Mahsa) Amini im Jahr 2022 staatlichen Repressionen angepasst hat. Die Arbeit basiert auf qualitativer Sozialforschung und kombiniert eine umfassende Literaturanalyse mit fünf halbstrukturierten Interviews mit vier Aktivist:innen und einer Expertin. Die Analyse stützt sich auf Theorien zu “Contentious Politics” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015; Johnston 2018), “Everyday Resistance” (Scott 1990), “Social Non-movements” (Bayat 2010) sowie auf “A Feminist Theory of Refusal” (Honig 2021), um zu untersuchen, wie Widerstand unter autoritären Bedingungen im Globalen Süden transformiert wird.

Die Ergebnisse der Arbeit zeigen, dass der Widerstand der Frau, Leben, Freiheit Bewegung trotz der Zunahme staatlicher Gewalt und Überwachung nicht erlischt, sondern sich vielmehr in adaptive und dezentrale Praktiken verändert hat: Die Formen des Protests haben sich von Massendemonstrationen hin zu alltäglichen Akten des Ungehorsams, digitalem Aktivismus sowie informellen Netzwerken der Solidarität und Fürsorge transformiert. Politische Praktiken werden durch Strategien, wie etwa die Weigerung, den Hijab zu tragen und die Schaffung informeller Unterstützungsnetzwerke fortgeführt.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Topic and State of Research

Numerous theoretical and empirical studies have explored the relationship between state repression and protest, yielding diverse findings. Some studies find that repression discourages participation (Ellefsen: 2016), while others suggest it can increase mobilization (Almeida: 2008). Scholars also note that repression may have a curvilinear effect (Opp: 1994) or lead to tactical shifts in protest behaviour (O'Brien & Deng: 2015). While a significant part of this research has focused on open and democratic regimes, *Johnston* (2018) underscores the necessity of research on contentious politics in authoritarian regimes. Since liberal democracies usually produce the typical repertoire of social movements, including activities such as marches, demonstrations and petitions, these forms of collective action are not as common in authoritarian regimes, where opportunities for protest and contestation are restricted. State repression and surveillance often prevent the emergence of social movements. These factors can create a unique environment for political contention in repressive regimes (cf. 21-25). The dynamics between state repression and protest actions are integral to understanding the outcomes of social movements in authoritarian settings. *Carey* (2006) states that repression and protest form a dynamic relationship, where state crackdowns can either cause dissent or resistance, depending on the regime's response and the resilience of the movement (cf. 2006: 8).

Central to this study is the concept of repertoires of contention by *Tilly & Tarrow* (2015) who define them as the range of known and available performances of political actors, ranging from mass demonstrations to symbolic performances such as public mourning and civil disobedience (cf. 2015: 14f.). These repertoires evolve and are adapted over time, shaped by historical contexts and the interplay between state actions and protestor responses. *Johnston* (2018) extends their framework by introducing „repertoires of repression” used by state authorities to suppress dissent and „repertoires of resistance” used by challengers to counter state control (cf. 2018: 20f.). In the context of Iran's authoritarian regime, where traditional forms of collective action that are common in liberal democracies are often limited due to state repression, understanding these repertoires and their adaptation in response to state repression is crucial for analysing the strategies and resilience of social movements in authoritarian settings.

In these settings, *Bayat* (2010) introduces the concept of „non-movements” and emphasizes the importance of „everyday resistance“ and the agency of ordinary people in challenging oppressive systems, ranging from mass demonstrations to symbolic performances such as public mourning and civil disobedience (cf. 2010: 10-15). Additionally, research has shown that feminist movements that operate within spaces of both state repression and patriarchal oppression rely heavily on distinctive forms of collective action that are informed by gender norms and cultural expectations. *Joshi* (2022) explains these as gendered repertoires of contention, which are the tactics and performances that women use to go through repression by the use of socially accepted roles, like mothers or caretakers, to receive legitimacy and moral authority. These repertoires not only depend on but also weaken the dominant ideas of femininity in the authoritarian contexts (cf. 2022: 201-205). Despite the growing attention to such dynamics, research on social movements in authoritarian settings is still less developed than in other fields. Most of the existing literature in the field, especially in the Global North, has studied movements that work in institutionalized political environments and assume the presence of legal frameworks, civil society protections and media access. On the contrary, regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran limit or make illegal public assembly, monitor digital spaces and at the same time, threaten heavy punishments to dissenters. In such circumstances, the means and reasons of mobilization can be different. With the situation of authoritarian practices becoming more and more common even in formally liberal democratic countries and the uprisings’ global visibility in countries like Belarus, Serbia, Morocco, Nepal, the Philippines, Turkey and Iran, this signals a significant demand for more empirically based, theory-driven and local-centric research that takes into account the resistance experiences under repression.

1.2 Research Interest and Motivation

My interest in this topic comes from a combination of personal connection and academic curiosity. Having followed Iranian politics for years through both personal ties as a member of the Iranian Diaspora and scholarly work, the events of 2022 appeared to me as historically and politically relevant. Following the voices of those resisting inside Iran, shared via social media, underground networks and diasporic platforms, I longed for a deeper understanding of what it means to resist under authoritarian conditions. As a freelance journalist and activist, I have worked previously on issues relating to Iran, including through my involvement in a Vienna-based diaspora association focused on political and social developments in the country. In

parallel, my academic interest in the topic was deepened during my master's studies in Development Studies, particularly through a seminar on the Middle East that critically examined power, resistance and social movements in the region. I was particularly motivated by the question of how protestors in Iran and more broadly, in the Global South, continue to resist in authoritarian settings. As authoritarian tendencies intensify globally, there is a growing scholarly interest in understanding how social movements respond to and operate under conditions of limited political freedom. By grounding this research in a case from the Global South, this thesis also aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to decentre Western-centric frameworks and highlight the knowledge practices of actors resisting authoritarianism in diverse settings.

1.2 Research Goals and Methodology

The central goal of this thesis is to comprehend the fate of a protest movement, such as the Woman Life Freedom Movement, after it has undergone repression. More specifically, it is to analyse the changes in the repertoires of resistance in response to state repression. This study uses a qualitative research design that works through a combination of an extensive literature review and empirical data from four semi-structured interviews with activists and an expert. A limited number of interviews are due to the politically sensitive context and the security risks associated with researching dissent in authoritarian settings like Iran. Therefore, the interviews are a supplement to the literature-based analysis, offering the firsthand accounts that deepen and provide a background for the theoretical discussion. The methodological approach, including sampling, data collection and analytical procedures, is explained in detail in Chapter 4. Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to the Study of International development by analysing how grassroots feminist movements in the Global South operate under repression in an authoritarian setting. It hopes to offer insight into how decentralized forms of resistance can reshape civic space and governance in authoritarian states and expand on the research of Social Movement studies in the Global South.

1.3 Research Question:

The central research question guiding this study is:

How has the „Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement in Iran transformed its repertoires of resistance in response to state repression?

1.4 Structure of Thesis

This thesis is divided into nine chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework that informs the analysis. It brings together key concepts from social movement theory, including *Tilly & Tarrow's (2015)* notion of repertoires of contention, *Scott's (1990)* theory of everyday resistance, *Johnston's (2018)* protest-repression nexus and *Bayat's (2010)* concept of social non-movement. A certain focus is given to debates around the applicability of social movement theory from the Global North to contexts in the Global South. These frameworks are synthesized under the lens of adaptive repertoires of resistance, which serves as the central analytical lens throughout the thesis. Chapter 3 provides the literature review of protest and repression in post-revolutionary Iran. It outlines the Islamic Republic's evolving mechanisms of control, its internal dynamics and the history of dissent. This background aims to set the stage for understanding the specific conditions under which the WLF Movement emerged. Chapter 4 then focuses on this movement in greater detail. It analyses its origins and characteristics and presents a synthesis of existing academic literature, reports of human rights organisations and media documentation on the repertoires of repression, resistance and their adaptation. Rather than simply recounting events, this chapter provides an analytical account of how the movement developed its own practices in response to the increasingly repressive state apparatus. Furthermore, Chapter 5 outlines the methodological design of the study. It discusses the choice of qualitative interviews, sampling strategies, data collection challenges and presents the thematic coding process that structured the analysis. In addition, the chapter reflects critically on the researcher's positionality, the power dynamics present in the interview situation and the ethical challenges of conducting research in politically sensitive contexts. Chapter 6 presents the empirical findings of the study, drawn from interviews with four protestors and one expert. The chapter is structured around seven key themes. Chapter 7 synthesizes, analyses and interprets these findings with the theory and answers the research question. Finally, in Chapter 8 I will take an outlook on potential future research and examine the limitations of this study. In Chapter 9 there will be the bibliography, figures and in the appendices an acknowledgement of AI assistance.

2. The Protest-Repression-Nexus

2.1 Social Movements and Contentious Politics

Social Movements

Definitions of social movements vary widely: Some perspectives highlight the role of organizations in identifying goals and mobilizing supporters (cf. McCarthy & Zald 2001, cited in Daniel & Neubert 2019: 183), while others define social movements by their social dynamics like collective actors, collective identity, informal networks and interactions with opponents (cf. Della Porta & Diani 2006: 20-22). Another approach views social movements as flexible networks of individuals and groups engaged in protest to achieve social or political change and emphasizes their fluid nature and capacity to unite diverse actors (cf. Neidhardt & Rucht 2001: 540). An alternative perspective considers social movements as sustained and organized efforts to challenge existing authorities. This perspective, developed by *Tilly* (2004; 1979), emphasizes the strategic and structured nature of social movements. According to this view, social movements are not merely spontaneous expressions of discontent but follow specific frameworks, involve a distinctive leadership and employ methods for making claims. Beyond questions of structure and identity, different perspectives also emerge regarding the scope, duration and methods of social movements. Some scholars argue that social movements must be sustained, organized efforts that persist over time, which distinguishes them from spontaneous protests or isolated demonstrations (cf. Almeida 2019: 7f.). Others take a broader view, including not only long-term mobilizations but also short-lived protest events and even violent uprisings. This expanded definition encompasses post-election riots, separatist struggles, movements advocating for the restoration of indigenous rights and even militant or terrorist groups (cf. Daniel & Neubert 2019: 185f.).

The events following the death of 22-year-old Jina (Mahsa) Amini in Iran have been conceptualized in various ways by scholars. One dominant perspective defines these events as the „Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement, emphasizing the unifying slogan that has become the central symbol of the mobilization (Shams & Gott 2023; Bayat 2023; Parsa 2023; Dabiri 2023). A similar classification refers to them as the „Woman, Life, Freedom” protests, focusing on the aspect of the mass demonstrations (Farzanegan & Fischer 2023). A different interpretation highlights the events as a „feminist strike”, framing them as a direct challenge to systemic

gender oppression and patriarchal structures (Assa 2023). Expanding on this perspective, they have also been described more broadly as a „feminist movement”, linking them to historical and global struggles for gender justice and positioning them within a larger context of feminist activism (Mehrabi 2023; Leloup 2023). Other scholars emphasize different aspects of the mobilization, like *Izadi & Dryden* (2024), who describe it simply as a protest movement, whereas *Sadeghi-Boroujerdi* (2023) situates the protests within *Bayat's* (2010) framework of „social non-movements” (also see in chapter 2.3), emphasizing their emergence through a combination of online platforms, interpersonal connections and informal networks (cf. 2023: 405). *Barjasteh & Jafarnejad* (2023) have collected and translated articles of Iranian Sociologists who resided in Iran during the protests. Among them, *Nematallah Fazeli* (cf. 2023: 87f.), associate professor of cultural anthropology and cultural studies at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies in Iran, argues that the protests constitute a „cultural movement” with political aspects, arguing that they transcend traditional class, demographic or union-based categorizations and reflect deeper societal shifts. Similarly, *Parviz Piran* (cf. 2023: 89f.), professor emeritus of sociology at Allameh Tabatabai University in Iran, uses the term „social meta-movement” to highlight the broad inclusivity of the mobilization, which unites people across gender, age and ethnicity under the unifying slogan of „Woman, Life, Freedom”.

In this thesis, I will use the term „Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement (abbreviated as WLF Movement) for its ability to encompass the breadth of these events while including the slogan that has become a unifying character for diverse groups.

Contentious Politics

To further contextualize the WLF Movement within the field of social movement research, the following section introduces *Tilly and Tarrow's* (2015) approach of contentious politics, which builds on and extends traditional social movement theory to capture a wider spectrum of collective action under varying political conditions. Before developing their respective approach to social movements, *McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly* (2004) reflect on the research in the 1960s and 1970s. In these decades, leading North American and European research on contentious politics focused on social movements, applying social movement theories to other forms of contention (cf. 2004: 14-16). Contention, according to *Tilly & Tarrow* (2015), consists of asserting claims that affect the interests of others. According to the authors, contentious politics exhibit consistent patterns, involving mechanisms and processes that can lead to

different political trajectories and outcomes, depending on their combinations and the social and political contexts in which they occur (cf. 2015: 7). In their book „Dynamics of Contention”, *McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly*, (2004) examine similarities, differences and development patterns in diverse forms of contentious politics, such as revolutions, strikes, wars and social movements (cf. 2004: 9). They refer to previous research, which has concentrated on four key concepts of social movements: political opportunities, mobilizing structures, collective action frames and repertoires of contention. While resource mobilization theory stresses organizational bases, resource accumulation and collective coordination, this model, though initially central, later appeared to downplay the emotional and interactive nature of movements. Political process theorists, including *McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly* (2004), emphasize dynamism, strategic interaction and political environment response. They investigated real-life claim-making forms, known as „repertoires of contention”, culturally encoded ways people interact in contentious politics. Recent scholars have added a focus on framing, seeing it as an active, creative process shaping group claims, opponents and identities. By the 1980s, researchers had developed a classical social movement agenda to study how political processes, mobilizing structures and framing processes impact contentious politics, focusing on how these elements shape the methods and repertoires of contention (cf. 2004: 14-16). While the classical social movement agenda was fitting in describing unified actors in democratic societies, it was less so for complex episodes of contention, particularly in nondemocratic states. Besides the classical social movement agenda, the authors suggest other ways to understand contentious politics, forming their own approach of mechanisms and processes to analyse the dynamics of collective actions like protests and its repressions (cf. 2004: 27-30).

Repression research examines why some individuals choose to engage in political activism despite facing severe repression, while others do not, focusing on the impact of repression on political participation, like protest. Protest, as defined by *Tarrow* (1991), involves disruptive collective action aimed at challenging governmental entities or policies. Repression includes a wide range of actions, including restrictions on free speech, human rights violations like torture and state terror such as genocide (cf. 1991: 11). Repression, as defined by *Chenoweth* (2021), is the coercive control exercised by governments through a range of tactics. It also varies in scope, intensity, lethality and duration, targeting different groups over time. Governments justify repression by claiming a monopoly on legitimate force, often maintaining control through the mere threat of violence. Even without daily crackdowns, a state can still be highly repressive if citizens fear potential coercion (cf. 2021: 183).

State repression, as defined by *Davenport, Johnston & Mueller* (2005) refers to actions taken by authorities against individuals or groups within their territory. These actions either restrict citizens' behaviour and beliefs through negative sanctions, such as curfews, mass arrests and bans on political organizations, or inflict physical harm or elimination through violations of personal integrity, such as torture, disappearances and mass killings (cf. 2005: 122). Some scholars argue that repression decreases participation and suppresses social movements (cf. Ellefsen 2016: 12). On the other hand, other researchers find that repression can lead to increased protest involvement (cf. Almeida 2008: 8). Additionally, some scholars suggest that repression generally has a curvilinear effect (cf. Opp 1994: 101p.) or that it leads to alternative methods of political expression, such as tactical shifts (cf. O'Brien and Deng 2015: 3). *Honari* (2018) stresses the lack of focus on a micro-level approach regarding the relationship between protest and state repression. The author contends that the inability to explain the varying effects of repression stems from a lack of focus on individual responses to repression. According to him, repression studies often overlook the fact that individuals, even when part of similar networks and structural contexts, perceive and interpret repression uniquely (cf. 2018: 951). *Carey's* (2006) study „The Dynamic Relationship between Protest and Repression” states that both repression and protest as a form of resistance mutually influence each other. The author views both protest and repression along a continuum of confrontational activities, from non-violent to violent actions (cf. Carey 2006: 2). *Goldstone et al.* (cf. 2001: 181) add that the opportunity for protest and repression interact and create dynamic patterns of contention. Different forms of contentious politics, including failed revolts, revolutions, reforms and conventional protests, are not fundamentally distinct but rather represent various outcomes of opposition and state interaction, shaped by specific conditions of movement suppression and regime decisions within a unified framework of political dynamics (cf. 2001: 193f.). *Carey's* (2006) study highlights the cyclical nature of the protest-repression nexus in autocracies. Both protest and repression tend to recur over time, creating a persistent pattern of conflict. Since autocratic regimes lack the institutional restraints that moderate government actions in democracies, they are especially adept at upholding repressive measures (cf. Carey 2006: 8).

2.2 Social Movements in the Global South

Social movement theories have predominantly emerged from the Global North and have been shaped by its historical periods of dissent. However, the applicability of these theories to

movements outside the Global North has been increasingly questioned. While classical social movement theory can offer insights into understanding contentious collective actions in the Global South, *Bayat* (2016) argues that there is a crucial question about whether researchers should treat the diverse histories, integration levels and development paths of these regions uniformly in analysis. He suggests considering the Global South as an analytical category with societies shaped by colonial experiences and post-colonial dependencies, rather than just as a geographical region. In contrast to the Global North, these societies have developed unique political cultures, economies and social structures, leading to different types of „modernity“. In contrast, the Global South is often confronted with undemocratic regimes and autocratic leaders, thus, protests can operate differently (Bayat 2016: 22-24). In this regard, theories from the Global North frequently fail to adequately explain the great adaptability and complexity of the motivations, organizational structures and effects of movements in the Global South. In sharp contrast to the realities of many developing nations with illiberal governance, theories like political Political Process Theory and New Social Movement Theory focus on movements within modern liberal welfare states (cf. Altman et al. 2017: 10). In these regions, social movements often emerge under repressive regimes, where they are important in advocating for citizenship rights and supporting democratic governance (cf. Thompson & Tapscott 2010: 12). In contrast to their counterparts in developed nations, *Shigetomi* (2009) highlights that social movements in developing nations are crucial mechanisms for citizen participation amid poverty, state repression and resource deprivation, often directly challenging state control (cf. 2009: 6). *Motta & Nielsen* (2011) further argue that traditional theories fail to account for the evolving dynamics of social movements responding to crises like neoliberalism. They advocate for political concepts grounded in the actual practices and experiences of Global South movements (cf. 2011: 24)

Despite recent advancements, concepts from Global South social movements remain marginally integrated into broader social movement theories, often confined to cultural studies rather than mainstream sociology or political studies (Altman et al. 2017: 12). *Fadaee* (2017) argues for recognizing the distinctive features of Southern social movements to develop a more inclusive global paradigm. This shift involves creating frameworks that incorporate the experiences and strategies of Global South movements into mainstream discourse while acknowledging the diversity within Southern contexts (cf. 2017: 46p.). *Bayat* (2016) also advocates for acknowledging these diverse realities and urges a shift in social movement theory towards a more inclusive, global perspective. He suggests developing innovative concepts that

decentralize the dominance of Western-centric social movement theory, thereby enriching our understanding of global social movements and contentious politics (cf. 2016: 22-24).

The erosion of civic rights and state repression frequently sparks collective action in the Global South. For example, authoritarian manipulation of electoral processes often triggers mass mobilizations demanding democratic integrity and questioning regime legitimacy (cf. Almeida 2019: 153f.). Repression, ranging from harassment to violence, remains a central tactic used to suppress dissent. However, it can also escalate protests and radicalize opposition movements, as seen during events like the Arab Spring. In response to repression, social movements in the Global South often emerge from resilient organizational foundations such as universities, labour unions and various civil society groups (cf. 2019: 150-155). Urban public spaces in the Global South can serve as crucial arenas for political contention, where marginalized groups challenge state control and voice their grievances through „street politics“. These spaces foster the formation of identities, solidarities and the expansion of protests beyond immediate circles, often triggering severe state repression due to their disruptive potential (cf. Bayat 2010: 11-13). Additionally, *Bayat* (2010) introduces the concept of „social non-movement“ (see chapter 2.3), where he analyses how ordinary people bring significant social change through collective yet fragmented actions.

2.3 Repertoires of Contention in Authoritarian Contexts

Johnston (2018) considers the protest-repression nexus as a dynamic and evolving arena, extending *Tilly's* (2006) concept of repertoires of contention. In *Tarrow & Tilly's* (2015) understanding, contentious performances are standardized ways in which political actors make collective claims. England's antislavery activists, for instance, utilized petitions, lobbying, press releases and public meetings (cf. 2015: 14f.). Their research examines how collective claim-making functions as a kind of performance in which particular actions are improvisations on well-known scripts that link demonstrators to their targets. For example, modular performances are generic forms like protests and petitions that are adaptable to different situations and allow for broad participation. Furthermore, the internet has changed mobilization by allowing for demonstrations at multiple locations and creating a form of connective action. The strength of modular performances, according to *Tarrow & Tilly* (2015), is their capacity to be both general and specific. In general, they are adaptable enough to fit a variety of contexts

and appeal to a wide range of participants and audiences. Demonstrations can, however, be adapted to local conditions and knowledge in certain situations. By adapting the general format to local languages, symbols and customs, skilled organizers can increase the protest's effectiveness and relevance. (cf. 2015: 15-17)

Building on this idea, *Johnston* (2018) introduces repertoires of repression and repertoires of resistance, highlighting that just as movements develop strategic protest actions, states also develop systematic methods to suppress dissent (cf. 2018: 20f.). A protest-repression nexus is created when state actions and resistance strategies interact, shaping and influencing one another over time. For example, movements frequently adapt by switching to more decentralized forms of protest, like digital activism or everyday resistance, in response to state violence against large-scale demonstrations. In authoritarian contexts like the Islamic Republic of Iran, traditional forms of collective action commonly used in liberal democracies are often suppressed by the state. In such regimes, new forms of collective action are necessary to push for greater responsiveness from state elites and to increase citizen participation. Effective resistance strategies build up under these oppressive circumstances, creating a repertoire of resistance that influences political conflict. This repertoire is dynamic, changing as activists modify their tactics in response to the need to innovate within the confines of authoritarian systems and practical knowledge (cf. Johnston 2018: 26-28).

Furthermore, because political openness and legal protections are lacking in authoritarian regimes such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, protest is rarely directed through institutional mechanisms. According to *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 3), dissent in authoritarian settings is frequently met with both direct and indirect repression, in contrast to liberal democracies, where formal opposition and legal protest frameworks exist. These include economic coercion, restrictive laws, media censorship, intimidation, state surveillance and arrests. Therefore, protestors must develop informal, adaptive and often covert strategies to protect themselves and sustain mobilization. As a result, distinct resistance repertoires that are less dependent on formal organization and public visibility emerge. In these circumstances, social movements typically develop dispersed, decentralized forms of activism rather than official registration or centralized leadership.

(Everyday) Resistance

„Where there is power, there is resistance”, *Foucault* (1976: 95) famously stated. His conceptualization of resistance is integral to his broader theory of power and presents resistance as an entwined component of power relations, in contrast to conventional conceptions of resistance as an opposition to power. According to him, power produces subjects, identities and norms in addition to being repressive. Therefore, resistance must be viewed as a dynamic force that emerges within the same structures that exercise power rather than as something that exists outside of it (cf. 1976: 95f.). While *Tilly* (2006) links resistance to collective action and state power, everyday resistance operates more through individual and informal practices, undermining power without being immediately recognized as resistance (cf. *Foucault* 1979: 135-138; *Johansson & Vinthagen* 2020: 183). *Tilly & Tarrow's* (2015) notion of repertoires of contention is expanded upon by *Johansson & Vinthagen* (2020) with repertoires of everyday resistance, which comprise unofficial, frequently covert acts by individuals that contest power relations without necessarily being a part of a larger movement (cf. 2020: 9). Due to its subtle and dispersed tactics that avoid direct conflict with authorities, this type of resistance is not always acknowledged as political (cf. 2020: 24). However, everyday resistance can set the stage for mass mobilization if it becomes widespread and organized. For instance, Palestine has developed a „culture of resistance” where various forms of opposition feed into and reinforce one another due to the interaction between regular acts of defiance and organized protests (cf. *Johansson & Vinthagen* 2020: 2; *Tripp* 2013: 312). Additionally, resistance can manifest itself in symbolic and cultural ways. Graffiti took the place of posters as the main form of resistance in Iran, for example, when political repression increased after 1980 and forced dissent underground (cf. *Tripp* 2013: 273). Furthermore, slogans, murals and images became powerful tools for expressing opposition while maintaining anonymity. In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the visibility of women in public spaces and the regulation of their bodies have come to symbolize the very authority of the state. Consequently, these issues have evolved into a contested space in everyday life, where they employ diverse, often creative tactics of everyday resistance to resist government control. This resistance is not limited to daily actions but also takes shape in a developing „art of resistance”, which uses symbolic methods to challenge government authority. More broadly, art serves as a tool of resistance by undermining the narratives and symbols used by those in power (cf. 2013: 298).

Scott (1990) developed his approach to a theory of everyday resistance in „Domination and the Arts of Resistance”, where he introduced a conceptual distinction between public transcripts and hidden transcripts. Public transcripts are described as official and visible performances of

power relations between the dominant and the subordinate. It refers to what is said and done in public when authority is present. This performance often reflects how those in power want to be seen and how subordinates act to avoid punishment. By concealing conflict and projecting an image of order, the public transcript serves the interests of the dominant rather than being impartial (cf. 1990: 2-5). On the other hand, political discourse and practices that occur offstage, away from the direct observation of those in positions of authority, are referred to as hidden transcripts. It appears in environments where subordinates can act and speak more freely without having to worry about immediate reprisals. These hidden transcripts include speech, gestures and behaviour that contradict or modify the dominant public transcript. Importantly, *Scott* (1990) argues that the very existence of domination creates the conditions for a hidden transcript to arise. It forms precisely because certain expressions are excluded from public space by mechanisms of control (cf. 1990: 4f.). Furthermore, beyond public obedience and private resistance, there is a third form of political expression used by subordinate groups. This type of resistance happens in public but is disguised or indirect. It includes things like jokes, rumors, songs, rituals and coded language. These forms allow people to express dissent without openly revealing their intentions or identities, making it safer to resist in repressive settings. He refers to this as *infrapolitics*, a field of covert, subtle resistance that is not recognized as political by the general public. *Infrapolitics* flourishes because it avoids direct conflict, in contrast to formal protest or revolutionary movements. It uses cultural forms that may seem harmless or apolitical and is conducted informally among families, neighbours and small communities. *Infrapolitics* leaves few traces due to its decentralized and hidden nature, making it challenging for academics to research and for authorities to repress (cf. 1990: 19-21).

Civic Resistance

Civic resistance, as defined by *Chenoweth* (2021), adopts a more formal approach to collective action through coordinated, public, nonviolent initiatives meant to transform political conditions. Strikes, boycotts and the establishment of alternative institutions are some strategies used in civil resistance to oppose state authority (cf. 2021: 2). According to her research, nonviolent movements typically have greater success than violent ones. Over the period from 1900 to 2019, more than 50% of nonviolent revolutions succeeded, compared to only 26% of violent uprisings (cf. 2021: 13). Nonviolent movements attract broader participation, minimize state justification for repression and create moral dilemmas for security forces. However, civil resistance movements do not always remain strictly nonviolent. Violent flanks, like unarmed acts of rioting, vandalism or direct clashes, sometimes emerge within

nonviolent movements, leading to internal debates about strategy (cf. 2021: 146). Repression can elicit various responses from resistance movements. These include, for example tactical adaptations, where movements may shift from large-scale protests to decentralized actions, like digital activism or smaller local mobilizations. Furthermore, in response to intense repression, movements might temporarily withdraw to regroup, build alternative institutions or prepare for future action. Finally, movements can strategically publicize the violence they experience, for example, on social media, in order to gain public sympathy and expose the brutality of the respective state (cf. 2021: 197).

Digital Protest

In authoritarian contexts, traditional media such as newspapers and television are often heavily controlled, suppressing dissenting voices and limiting the free flow of information. In contrast, the internet offers a unique platform for decentralized and instant communication, which enables citizens to share information and mobilize protests far more effectively. Unlike democracies, where information flows more openly, the internet has significantly amplified protests in authoritarian regimes, as seen during the Arab Spring in 2011, by granting citizens increased access to information (cf. Ruijgrok 2017: 501; Faris & Meier 2012: 204). *Ruijgrok* (2017) confirms that from 1993 to 2010, the internet played a critical role in protest mobilization in authoritarian regimes, despite governments' attempts to control online activity. While such governments may manage to suppress online content to some extent, they have not been able to hinder the use of the internet as a tool for resistance. This increased access to information fosters more protests through four key mechanisms: reducing the cost and risk of organizing opposition, exposing citizens to alternative viewpoints and changing attitudes, eliminating uncertainty and encouraging action and mobilizing through visual media, such as videos and photos. The Tunisian protests of 2010-2011 exemplify how these mechanisms work in practice, facilitating mobilization even in the face of government attempts to control the internet (cf. Ruijgrok 2017: 514).

The difficulties of coordination and the fear of reprisals make organizing collective action even more difficult in authoritarian regimes, where governments frequently repress dissent. The fear of personal injury makes many citizens reluctant to take action, even when the majority of them want change. When friends and neighbours participate, people are more likely to follow suit (cf. Faris & Meier 2012: 199-202). Digital activism, by rapidly disseminating information and framing narratives, can trigger „informational cascades”, in which individuals follow the

actions of others without independent judgment, as described by *Bikhchandani et al.* (1992: 994). *Earl* (2016) expands on this, introducing the concept of „flash-based” mobilization, which allows for large-scale but short-lived participation. This form of activism lowers the barriers to engagement, enabling people who might otherwise avoid high-risk offline protests to take part in online activism. While this increases participation, it may also lead to movements that lack sustainability and continuity over the long run (cf. *Earl* 2016: 376-378). According to *Tufekci* (2017), social media plays a crucial role in promoting political engagement. Many activists attribute their political awakening to online interactions (cf. 2017: xxiii-xxix). Digital technologies have drastically changed the environment in which social movements function, even though they have not fundamentally changed social behaviours. In the digital age, important mechanisms like „homophily”, the tendency to connect with like-minded individuals, have evolved. Social media platforms foster long-distance homophily, enabling the formation of political communities based on shared beliefs. Social media platforms facilitate the development of political communities based on common beliefs by supporting long-distance homophily. Additionally, the environment in which movements function is shaped by social media platforms, which prioritize monetizing attention. Movements now face more of a challenge in managing credibility, trust and information overload than in obtaining information. As a result, new middlemen have appeared to confirm information and offer substitute gatekeeping methods, such as citizen journalist collectives (cf. *Tufekci* 2017: 268-271). The emergence of ubiquitous digital recording devices, such as smartphones, has also fostered a form of citizen-driven observation, referred to as „sousveillance” (cf. *Mann et al.* 2003). In this practice, people actively document the activities of authoritarian regime agents during crucial times of conflict or crisis. It is important to note that this form of sousveillance is not primarily concerned with directly challenging the overarching surveillance apparatus of the state. Rather, its principal objective lies in undermining the state’s ability to control the narrative surrounding events. Practically speaking, this takes the form of documenting or taking pictures of police and security personnel violating human rights during protests, public demonstrations, or even everyday encounters (cf. *Faris & Meier* 2012: 199-202).

Tufekci (2017) uses the concept of „networked protests” to describe how digital technologies enable the rapid mobilization of large numbers of people through online platforms. They frequently avoid important organizational structures that are essential for long-term sustainability, like leadership development and group decision-making. Digital tools present difficulties even though they enable activists to spread messages, bypass censorship and act as

their own media. Despite allowing for open participation, social media platforms frequently result in the rise of unofficial leaders with sizable fan bases, which can lead to internal disputes. Because these movements lack formal dispute resolution procedures, their decentralized structure makes decision-making more difficult. There are risks associated with digital activism as well. In authoritarian regimes, where governments use the internet to stifle dissent by either flooding platforms with false information or harassing activists specifically, activities like tweeting or posting online can be dangerous. Because platforms favour advertiser-friendly content over political messages, algorithm-driven visibility makes activism even more difficult (cf. Tufekci, 2017: xxiii-xxix). According to *Hellmeier* (2016), governments employ a „digital toolkit” to regulate political activism on the internet. Countries with strong anti-government movements often enforce stricter internet censorship through tactics like limiting access, spreading propaganda, shutting down the internet and filtering content to discourage activism (cf. 2016: 1181). Thus, while digital media can be a powerful tool for mobilizing dissent, they also present unique challenges in authoritarian settings in terms of state surveillance, misinformation and the potential for movements to lack continuity and long-term impact (cf. Earl 2016: 376-378).

Social Non-movement

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, *Bayat* (2010; 2016) challenges whether conventional social movement theories can adequately address the unique histories, complexities and specific characteristics of oppositional movements in the Global South, considering that these theories originate from highly differentiated and politically open Western societies, which contrasts with the politically closed and repressive conditions found in regions like the Middle East. Next to insurrections, national revolutions and social movements, unique and unconventional forms of agency and activism have emerged in the region, which often go overlooked because they don't fit into established categories and conceptual frameworks. In „Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East”, he gives an example of the early 2000s, when Iranian analysts who applied traditional social movement theory to Muslim women's activism in Iran concluded that there was no women's movement, since Iranian women's activities did not align with the conventional model. To better understand such activism, he advocates for an approach that rejects both Middle Eastern exceptionalism and the uncritical use of conventional social science concepts (cf. 2010: 4f.).

In 2007, Iran saw the arrest of thousands of activists, including journalists, teachers, students, women and members of labour, civil and cultural organizations. Many faced court charges or lost their jobs. Additionally, numerous newspapers, magazines and hundreds of NGOs were shut down. As a result, the political class had limited options, either temporarily withdrawing from the political scene or going underground due to the lack of freedom for political activities (cf. 2010: 10). According to *Bayat* (2010), the repression changes the actions of the activists to alternative forms of contention, which Bayat refers to as „social non-movement” (cf. 4f.). *Bayat* (2010: 14) defines a non-movement as „collective actions of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations. Although they are separate entities, the term „movement“ suggests that social non-movement share important, consequential characteristics with social movements. He identifies a number of crucial traits that characterize social non-movement. They are first and foremost action-oriented, giving direct practices precedence over ideology. In line with *Johansson & Vinthagen’s* (2020) theory, members of non-movement operate discreetly and autonomously, frequently without official collective organization. Another important distinction is that non-movement is ingrained in daily life, in contrast to social movements, which frequently involve extraordinary acts like protests, lobbying, or meetings. Non-movement practices include, for instance, the construction of homes by the poor, the pursuit of livelihoods by migrants, the pursuit of education or nontraditional employment by women and the assertion of personal freedom by young people in day-to-day activities. These behaviours are part of everyday life and frequently take place without official political organization or coordination (cf. 2010: 19f.). *Orazani & Teymoori* (2024) contends that this politicization of daily activities has turned common people into active political agents who use oppositional identities and lifestyles to oppose state repression because the Islamic Republic of Iran uses a variety of repressive tactics, such as mandatory veiling and media control, to enforce its theocratic politics (cf. 2024: 12-14). Lastly, the power of non-movement stems from the sheer number of individuals exhibiting similar behaviours rather than from coordinated action. Even though the individuals are still dispersed, their combined presence has a big influence on social norms and regulations. Despite their lack of formal organization, these people’s simultaneous performance of similar acts has a consequential effect that can progressively challenge the status quo and impact social change. Unlike traditional social movements, which involve organized mobilization, non-movements involve the formation of collective identities among dispersed individuals. Non-movements create

solidarity mainly in public areas, in contrast to movements that depend on formal institutions or solidarity networks, which are frequently inaccessible because of surveillance. Collective action is made possible by this unofficial process even in the absence of leadership or organizational structures. Through the use of social networking sites in particular, new information technology can connect geographically remote people virtually. People can interact and form connections without being physically close to one another thanks to the opportunities this creates for both passive and active networks (cf. 2010: 19f.).

What bridges the gap between passive networks and collective action in non-movement is often a common threat. While individuals in non-movement typically achieve their goals through personal, direct actions, the defence of these gains frequently takes place collectively when faced with shared risks. For example, women who individually defy dress codes may band together when confronted by morality police in public. *Bayat* (2010) raises the question of how and when non-movement might evolve into contentious politics and organized social movements. He concludes that the quiet defiance of many individuals can indicate that a significant societal mobilization is already happening. This mobilization can turn into contentious politics when there are opportunities for organized activism, such as during state crises, conflicts, or the rise of more tolerant governments. However, the impact of non-movements should not just be measured by their potential to become formal social movements. They can also create meaningful change on their own. Non-movements can weaken state authority, as states often embed their power within social norms and institutions. The actions of non-movements challenge this power structure. While states might try to absorb or control these subversive practices, it can be difficult to do so. The gradual nature of claims made within non-movements can reduce the state's ability to counter their effects. If a state accommodates the demands of non-movement, it may signify a significant change within the state itself. (cf. 2010: 24f.)

Adaptive Repertoires

Moqadam (cf. 2025: 18) expands on this by tracing how Iranian feminist activism has historically adapted to political constraints. In the absence of legal ways for change, women have carved out new spaces of resistance, from the domestic sphere to digital platforms and turned limitations into opportunities for collective action. She emphasizes that recent movements in Iran demonstrate how resistance can scale across different spatial and temporal dimensions without requiring formal organizations. These actions exemplify what she calls

„fractal scaling”, a pattern in which resistance replicates and adapts itself across multiple levels during repression. Such dynamics have enabled feminist networks to remain resilient and to reemerge in moments of rupture, such as during the WLF Movement.

In „A Feminist Theory of Refusal”, *Bonnie Honig* (2021) develops refusal as a feminist form of political action that does not withdraw from power but engages with it differently. Rather than avoiding politics, she believes that feminism must „risk the impurities of politics“ (2021: 1). Therefore, refusal is a continuous and active practice that both opposes patriarchal dominance and creates room for alternative ways of coexisting. She describes a „arc of refusal” that emerges through three ideas, which she derives from other authors: inoperativity, inclination and fabulation. Together, these concepts explain how feminist politics interrupt existing orders, form new solidarities and re-narrate collective meaning. The term „inoperativity“ describes the suspension of patriarchal systems’ regular operations. She views it as a collective disruption in daily life rather than as inaction (cf. 2021: 7-44). By describing how feminists relate to one another through solidarity and mutual care, Inclination expands on this. *Honig* (2021) moves away from the idea of maternal, peaceful care and instead speaks of a form of relation of sisterhood and solidarity that accepts conflict and risk as part of political life (cf. 2021: 55-68). Fabulation means creating new stories and interpretations that challenge dominant histories and imagine alternative futures. Through fabulation, those who have been silenced can speak again and reclaim the right to appear in public and political spheres. Together, these three practices form what she calls an „arc of refusal“. Refusal, in this sense, is not just saying „no” but creating and maintaining alternative forms of community, narratives and power. Framing feminism as tragic rather than heroic, she stresses that failure and repetition are part of political transformation. (cf. 2021: 72-100).

The theories discussed in this chapter provide the basis for understanding how resistance is organised under authoritarian conditions. However, the aim of this thesis is not to apply one singular theory, but to synthesize a range of approaches that speak to different dimensions of resistance, which have adapted due to state repression. To capture the flexibility and strategic innovation visible in movements like the WLF Movement, I use, drawing from this body of academic sources, the term *adaptive repertoires* to describe the evolving strategies of resistance that emerge under authoritarian repression.

3 Protest and Regime Repression in Post-revolutionary Iran

3.1 The Islamic Republic between Hardliners and Reformists

The Islamic Republic of Iran is an example of a political model that combines elements of republicanism and theocracy. According to *Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi* (2020), Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, one of the leading figures of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and later dictator of the country, initially envisioned a state governed under the „guardianship of the juris” (*velayat-i faqih*), where authority rested with the Shia clergy. However, recognizing the revolutionary intention that overthrew the monarchy, Khomeini introduced a dual political system consisting of an unelected Supreme Leader with control over military and security institutions alongside an elected president and parliament with limited powers. This dual structure, though offering some democratic processes, has been shaped by intense factionalism, where various groups within the regime compete for influence. While Khomeini was able to unite the conflicting factions during his rule, his death led to evolving conflicts between the factions, transforming the electoral process into a dynamic arena where ordinary Iranians could impact the regime’s power struggles and influence the nation’s political direction (cf. 2020: 6p; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023: 422). This shift continued in the decades that followed, reaching a peak during the 1999 student protests under President Khatami’s reformist administration. *Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi* (2020) consider these protests as the aspirations of a new generation seeking democratic reforms within the structure of the Islamic Republic. However, the state’s rapid crackdown revealed the limits of tolerance even during a period of relative political openness. Although these protests posed security threats, they were quickly suppressed, ultimately lacking the potential to challenge the regime’s stability fundamentally. This ongoing tension between unelected institutions and elected branches, fueled by the ongoing factional rivalry, reached a peak during the controversial 2009 presidential election, ignited by allegations of electoral fraud during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection. This unrest saw over a million demonstrators, especially in the capital city Tehran, mobilizing for the candidate of the reformist party, Mir Hossein Mussawi. Security forces ultimately responded to the movement with violence and mass arrests (cf. 2020: 4-7).

While the 1999 and 2009 demonstrations in Iran were closely tied to the reformist movement’s approach for government openness and policy change (cf. Ghasseminejad et al. 2020: 147f.), *Sydiq* (2023) describes the Green Movement of 2009 as a moment when a critical „red line”

was crossed in the state-society relationship, while *Kazemzadeh* (2023) calls it a „turning point” (cf. *Sydiq* 2023: 274p; *Kazemzadeh* 2023: 112). These demonstrations were initially thought to be in favour of the system, but they soon gained unmanageable momentum, widening rifts within the government and frightening Supreme Leader Khamenei, who reacted to what he saw as a destabilizing threat with severe repression. Participants were unaware that they were crossing a critical line because of the Green Movement’s capacity for autonomous mobilization. The movement’s leaders assumed they were working within the system, advocating for legal elections, as many of them were longtime supporters of the 1979 Revolution. The violence they experienced demoralized protesters, who even identified with the Revolutionary Guards’ legacy (cf. *Sydiq* 2023: 274f.). At first, protesters called for a fair vote count that favoured Moussavi, the opposition candidate, over President Ahmadinejad. But as the government reacted violently, their demands grew more democratic and by December 2009, they were calling for Khamenei’s overthrow (cf. *Kazemzadeh* 2023: 112). Thus, this „red line“ was not fixed but shifted in response to events, as actors and actions once considered system-supporting were now considered threatening (cf. *Sydiq* 2023: 274f.).

The post-election crisis highlighted the unintended consequences of political leaders’ actions. Khamenei expected reformists to submit, but the leaders of the faction defied him, urging public protests. Contrary to expectations, citizens sustained mass demonstrations. Between June 2009 and June 2010, hardliners lost legitimacy and internal unity but managed to contain the uprising. Meanwhile, reformists, despite popular support, failed to gain power, leaving their base disillusioned (cf. *Kazemzadeh* 2023: 113). In the aftermath of the Green Movement, many reformist leaders criticized Mir-Hossein Musavi’s support for street protests, arguing that this distracted from the broader reformist agenda, which prioritizes working within the system. This perspective rested on a strict separation between elections as institutional politics and social movements as external to the political system, neglecting historical examples of successful alliances between opposition movements and electoral campaigns. By reinforcing this divide, the reformist leadership not only distanced itself from the protest base but also missed an opportunity to turn street mobilization into a sustained political force (cf. 2023: 301).

3.2 The Iranian State amidst Multiple Crisis

According to *Sydiq* (2023), the Iranian state post 2009 underwent a fundamental shift, with politics becoming increasingly securitized. This shift means that political conflicts are

increasingly handled through security-based measures, prioritizing regime survival over political goals (cf. 2023: 275). *Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi* (2020) also note that the Green Movement's suppression significantly weakened the reformist faction, suggesting the Islamic Republic is heading toward a more authoritarian trajectory (cf. 2020: 6). Consequently, the power balance was further altered by the emergence of elites from the security establishment and the expanding power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is directly under the leadership of Supreme Leader Khamenei (cf. Sidiq 2023: 276p.). Fearing that a reformist government would jeopardize its authority and financial interests, the IRGC has greatly increased its political and economic influence in recent years. While its economic involvement began after the Iran-Iraq War, since Ahmadinejad's administration (from 2005 onward), the IRGC's economic power grew further, including an acquisition of 51% of Iran's communications industry for 8 billion dollars (cf. Kazemzadeh 2023: 45). These shifts saw security-driven institutions gaining greater power while weakening civilian political institutions. The increasing dominance of the IRGC not only diminished civilian political agencies but also focused Iran's political agenda on preserving the regime's security rather than pursuing broader reform (cf. Sidiq 2023: 276p.).

However, in 2013, presidential candidate Hassan Rouhani won a decisive victory, supported primarily by reformists and offering hope for political and economic reform. Rouhani inherited an economy struggling with high inflation and recession, but through efforts to stabilize the economy, he achieved a reduction in inflation from 39% to 9.6% by 2017. The 2015 nuclear deal also led to short-term economic growth, with both GDP and non-oil GDP showing notable increases (cf. Ghasseminejad et al. 2020: 148p.). Despite these successes, Rouhani faced increasing opposition from Khamenei, hardliners and the IRGC, particularly after his re-election in 2017, when he promised further reforms. Khamenei's attacks on Rouhani and the moderate factions forced the president to appease the Supreme Leader, thereby dashing hopes for political reform and leaving many of his supporters feeling betrayed (cf. *Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi* 2020: 7; *Sadeghi-Boroujerdi*: 425). Although the state experienced economic improvements, the benefits largely bypassed ordinary Iranians. The ruling elite, particularly those aligned with Khamenei and the IRGC, benefited most from the economic gains. With the Trump administration's economic sanctions, Iran's economy was further severely weakened. On May 8, 2018, Trump renounced the 2015 nuclear agreement (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1, which made economic problems worse. By 2020, Iran's inflation rate had risen from less than 10% in 2015 to more than 40%. The value of the Rial, the country's currency, has been

steadily declining since 1979, but it plummeted after Trump withdrew from the JCPOA (cf. Kazemzadeh 2023: 124p.).

Many Iranians were disappointed by the lack of progress as the Iranian government continued to prioritize foreign military engagements over domestic welfare, such as its support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria (cf. Ghasseminejad et al. 2020:148f.). According to *Kazemzadeh* (2023), this is due to the reformist faction's own political goals. Instead of aiming for a transition to democracy, their suggested changes are intended to uphold the fundamentalist government and constitution. They continue to be dedicated to maintaining the authoritarian system rather than opposing it (cf. 2023: 27).

The economic situation worsened in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the global economic downturn led to a decline in oil prices, further reducing Iran's oil revenues by October 2020 (cf. 2023: 129). The 2021 presidential election, which saw ultra-conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi elected, was widely perceived as manipulated by the unelected Guardian Council, which disqualified many Reformists and even some center-right candidates. According to *Sadeghi-Boroujerdi* (2023) this interference in the electoral process and the perception that the Supreme Leader and his allies were determined to ensure Raisi's victory played a significant role in the low turnout and diminished trust in the election's legitimacy (cf. 2023: 425). By August 2021, Iran's hardline faction had full control over key institutions, securing their dominance both in the short term and for future leadership after Khamenei (cf. Kazemzadeh 2023: 28). The ongoing failure to address internal issues has left Iran in a state of political deadlock. As *Fathollah-Nejad* (2020) points out, the crisis of reformism is rooted in the authoritarian structures that systematically undermine the fragile civil society of the Iranian system. This crisis has evolved into a broader political stalemate, impacting all factions within the regime, from hardliners to moderates and even the clerical establishment. The repeated inability of reformist administrations to fulfill their promises of socio-political change has eroded public trust and confidence in the state's ability to reform itself. *Fathollah-Nejad* (2020) argues that these failures have further deepened the political crisis and contributed to growing dissatisfaction with the entire political system, with each faction becoming more vulnerable to the frustrations of the Iranian people (cf. 2020: 24-27). Consequently, this has been contributing to the waves of public protests seen in subsequent years (cf. Ghasseminejad et al. 2020:149; Kazemzadeh 2023: 29). In this context, *Fathollah-Nejad* (2020) defines a „triple crisis” that the Islamic Republic of Iran faces, which includes socio-economic, political and

ecological challenges. Next to the crisis of reformism, the Iranian population has experienced worsening economic conditions and the U.S. economic sanctions, leading to high inflation, rising prices and widespread poverty, worsened by neoliberal economic policies and an ideologically driven economy that benefits regime loyalists, leading to corruption and cronyism. This has caused severe issues like unemployment, housing shortages and particularly impacts youth, women and ethnic minorities (cf. 2020: 20-22). He references *Bayat* (2018) who has introduced the concept of the „middle-class poor” of Iran, a new social group facing economic insecurity despite holding middle-class qualifications and ambitions. This group has become the primary base for protests since 2017.

Additionally, Iran is dealing with an ecological crisis, including water shortages, pollution, deforestation and desertification. This environmental degradation, driven by domestic policies, could make half the country’s provinces uninhabitable by 2038, potentially displacing up to 50 million people. These ecological challenges worsen economic and social instability, driving further political unrest as citizens demand action to protect both natural resources and public welfare (cf. 2020: 27). *Hamann* (2023) adds that the human rights situation in Iran has been deteriorating for years. Despite Iran’s official commitment to human rights, demonstrated by its ratification of important UN human rights treaties, the actual implementation of these rights remains inconsistent. Human rights organizations and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran continue to document widespread violations (cf. 2023: 355). For instance, Iran accounted for 64% of global executions in 2024 (cf. Amnesty International 2025: 10). Additionally, there has been an increase in press censorship and restrictions on democratic freedoms, with frequent journalist arrests and violent repression of protests (cf. *Hamann* 2023: 355). Moreover, various marginalized groups in Iran face systemic discrimination and persecution. These include LGBTQIA+ individuals, ethnic minorities such as the Baluchi, Kurdish, Arab and Azeri populations, immigrants like the Afghan population, as well as religious minorities, including Baha’is, Jews, Christians and Sunni Muslims (cf. *Fathollah-Nejad* 2020: 21f.). The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishes a framework that systematically discriminates against religious minorities, effectively concentrating political power within the Shia Muslim majority. This discrimination is evident in both the legal structure and prevailing social norms. Certain recognized religious minorities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews and select Christian groups like Armenians, are granted limited representation in the parliament. However, this representation is connected to their support to state-sanctioned policies. Furthermore, the Sunni Muslim population faces severe political

marginalization. This is demonstrated by their exclusion from key governmental positions, including cabinet roles and restrictions on their religious practices, such as the construction of mosques. In addition, religious groups outside of the officially recognized categories, including Bahais, Christian converts, Yarsan followers and Mandaeans, experience intensified repression. This includes instances of arbitrary arrests, executions and limitations on educational and employment opportunities. The state's use of political violence as a mechanism to maintain control is also a critical factor. This violence targets a wide range of opposition groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, labour unions, feminist movements and LGBTQ+ communities (cf. Kazemzadeh 2023: 15-21).

In his analysis of the roots of the WLF Movement, *Sadeghi-Boroujerdi* (2023) identifies several crises that are interlinked and together form a larger, ongoing crisis in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Among those crises is the crisis of the gender regime (cf. 2023: 432). Gender-based discrimination is pervasive in Iran, with women experiencing widespread marginalization in multiple facets of social, cultural and political life. This includes compulsory veiling, restricted divorce rights, lack of legal protection against domestic violence and marital rape and the legal inequity where a woman's testimony is considered half as valuable as that of a man (cf. Amnesty International 2023). In response to these extensive human rights violations, the Iranian women's movement has actively resisted through protests, civil disobedience and the reclamation of both public and private freedoms, continually fighting for civil rights (cf. Tohidi 2023: 80).

3.3 Changing Dynamics in the Iranian Protest Movement

Protests in Iran have undergone significant transformations since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Some scholars consider the demonstrations in 2017 and 2019 as a notable shift in the nature of dissent. *Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi* (2020) contend that the radicalization of protest movements in recent years is largely due to a growing sense of hopelessness among the population, stemming from the perceived inability to achieve meaningful reform or economic improvement. This disillusionment is amplified by the concentration of power within unelected factions, widespread corruption and economic conditions that have weakened public trust in the regime, leading to a crisis of legitimacy (cf. 2020: 2f.). *Sidiq* (2023) argues that due to increasing security policies since 2009, more power has shifted toward elites connected to the Revolutionary Guards. This shift has moved influence away from policy-driven political

leaders to security-focused actors, whose main goal is to protect the current system. For authoritarian regimes, shifting towards a security-focused approach can help them endure times of instability. Processes like elections, media coverage and NGO work are often sidelined or viewed solely through the lens of whether they enhance or undermine the power of the regime. However, this shift ultimately limits the foundations of the regime's legitimacy as well as its scope of action (cf. 2023: 276f.).

An examination of the Iranian protests in 2017 and 2019 shows a significant demographic change that sets them apart from earlier protests. In particular, marginalized rural and urban populations increased their participation in these later protests, suggesting a wider base of dissent. Furthermore, these demonstrations have spread to smaller towns and villages outside of major cities like Tehran, making it more difficult for the regime to quell opposition using conventional security tactics. A key feature of these protests was the increased tendency for direct action, including instances of violence, particularly among groups historically aligned with the regime. Opposition to the mandatory hijab is one example of the growing emphasis on cultural freedoms that accompanied this change. This indicates a shift away from the 2009 Green Movement's reformist focus and points to an increase in revolutionary sentiments (cf. Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi 2020: 2p; Kazemzadeh 2023: 115). This transformation in protest dynamics is further supported by an examination of the evolution of Iran's post-revolutionary protest culture. The 2017 and 2019 protests showed a shift toward more radical calls for systemic change, whereas the 1999 and 2009 protests mainly supported policy reform and governmental transparency. Additionally, the organizational structure of these protests transformed, moving from coordinated, leader-driven movements to decentralized, leaderless demonstrations (cf. Ghasseminejad, Taleblu & Katz 2020:147-153).

Sardarnia & Alborzi (cf. 2022: 135-137) make a significant contribution in this regard by examining labour and social protests from 2017 to 2021 via the lens of street politics. They characterize these protests as a significant turning point in Iran's post-revolutionary trajectory, describing them as spontaneous, characterized by radical slogans and a growing mistrust of civil society and professional organizations. The street became a place of collective agency, self-expression and resistance. Particularly in reaction to regime corruption and mismanagement, a variety of actors, including workers, students, women and the unemployed, banded together to link economic grievances like poverty and inequality to political discontent. Importantly, the authors argue that this shift reflects a broader refusal to remain politically

passive and signals the emergence of what *Tajik* (2007) calls the „expressionist self”, where ordinary citizens assert their identity and pain in the public sphere, especially in the absence of institutional support.

Additionally, as working-class participation increased, economic grievances gained prominence, with demonstrators directly targeting financial institutions and connecting their financial struggles to regime corruption. This was a pivotal moment, as political grievances and economic dissatisfaction came together to fuel the movement. The public’s disapproval of the regime’s foreign policy expenditures was further highlighted by the protests’ prominent use of slogans denouncing its expensive foreign interventions in Syria and other regional conflicts (cf. *Kazemzadeh* 2023:115). Another protest moment came in January 2020 when Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 was shot down by the IRGC, killing 176 people. Protests broke out all over the nation after the regime took responsibility. In addition to tributing the victims, protesters chanted anti-government slogans and tore down pictures of regime officials as a way of expressing their rage at the state’s deceit and impunity (cf. *Assa* 2023: 65).

These developments are particularly visible in the way public space has been contested and redefined by both resistance and state repression. Iranian public spaces are influenced by more subtle factors like neglect, exclusion and erasure in addition to overt repression and control. According to *Amir-Ebrahimi & Huffs Schmid* (cf. 2018: 30), these dynamics are encapsulated in what *Cupers & Miessen* (2002) have called „spaces of uncertainty”, meaning urban zones marked by ruins, voids, or unfinished development, which reflect the failure or collapse of political projects. The lines between private and public life are frequently blurred in these ambiguous and interstitial spaces, which also present opportunities for alternative expression and resistance. For instance, open urban areas become areas of surveillance and control when authorities, like the morality police, suddenly appear, especially targeting women and young people. This instability is further extended into virtual public spaces by the censorship and filtering of digital platforms. Iranian public space has changed over time as a result of these interventions. The rise of the morality police has made streets and squares, which were once considered modern and open, increasingly subject to conservative Islamic regulation. Because of this, there are now spatial dualities that vary depending on who is there and when. As a result, these spaces have been shaped by contestation and everyday resistance, particularly among women and young people, making them both more uncertain and freer (cf. *Amir-Ebrahimi & Huffs Schmid* 2018: 30p.). This gendered struggle has given rise to unique forms of

protest, in contrast to protests in Western contexts where secularism and liberal rights discourse predominate. Before 2022, *Amir-Ebrahimi and Huffscheid* (2018) identified four evolving forms of resistance in Iran, each impacted by authoritarian governance, religious control and technological advancements. Chapter 4 will provide more details on these resistance repertoires. The first is traditional organized protest, characterized by public visibility and leadership, like the women's anti-hijab march and the 1979 Revolution. The second involves decentralized, digital activism, including the „One Million Signatures” campaign and the Green Movement, relying on social media to mobilize without centralized control. The third, drawing on *Bayat's* concept of „non-movement“, consists of everyday, informal acts like university attendance and defiance of dress codes, which gradually shift norms. The fourth is individual, symbolic protest amplified online, as seen in the „Girls of Revolution Street“, where small acts of defiance gain power through digital replication (cf. 2018 32f.).

Ghasseminejad et al. (2020) also observe a radicalization in the state's increasingly violent response to these protests. Compared to the violent crackdowns on earlier uprisings in 1999 and 2009, the 2019 protests in particular were met with a higher level of repression, leading to hundreds of deaths and thousands of arrests. This escalation of state violence further demonstrates the regime's shift from repressing reformist demands to suppressing broader calls for systemic transformation (cf. 2020 147–153). It also suggests that the regime is aware of the growing revolutionary sentiment within the populace and is determined to use force to suppress dissent.

Sidiq (2023) examines the phenomenon of how the ongoing protests and state violence lead to a vicious circle in authoritarian regimes such as Iran. These governments, which depend on the security forces to keep control, are in a dilemma: on the one hand, as protests increase, they also increase the use of security forces; however, on the other hand, this rise in security operations provokes even more protests. The transfer of power to the security forces that are carrying out the repression makes it difficult to hand over the control to civil structures again, thus there is a danger not only of public uprisings but also of rebellion within the regime. At the same time, for activists, non-violent methods are gradually becoming less efficient as the regime disengages from the public, thus they are forced to turn to more direct, aggressive measures. The recent protests in Iran, led by the youth, are a clear example of such a transition, as they have been able to socially coordinate their activities through the use of social media and organizing more structured movements besides erecting barricades on the streets.

Nevertheless, *Sidiq* (2023) maintains that these tactics have little effect because the authorities are better equipped and well-prepared. At the same time, quieter stages of regrouping and recuperation consequently follow periods of intense protest (cf. 2023: 278p.).

4. The „Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement in Iran

4.1 The Iranian Women’s Movement and Early Mobilization

The emergence of the WLF Movement in Iran is tied with the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini on September 16th, 2022. Three days prior, the 22-year-old Kurdish woman had been arrested in Tehran by the morality police for allegedly not adhering to the compulsory hijab law. This law, requiring all women and girls over nine, including non-Muslims, to wear the hijab, was introduced in April 1983, four years after the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. Back in March 1979, women had protested in Tehran against the new regime’s hijab mandate, however their movement lacked broader support. The regime consequently created the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known as the morality police, to enforce the dress code and other state-imposed rules. Over time, these „morality checks” spread to schools, streets, public offices and other public spaces, where women were monitored for adherence to the dress code (cf. Khatam 2023: 301f). *Kazemzadeh* (2023) argues that the enforcement of hijab within the Iranian regime has served as a symbol of political dominance rather than solely a religious symbol. While the regime has demonstrated flexibility on other aspects of its restrictive policies towards women, such as education and employment, the compulsory hijab has remained non-negotiable, although less strict interpretations of it have been tolerated. This inflexibility stems from its function as a visible marker of the regime’s control and women’s submission. For the regime’s conservative base, the compulsory hijab is a public affirmation of their ideological victory and power. Essentially, the hijab transcended its religious significance, becoming a crucial instrument for asserting and maintaining political authority (cf. 2023: 136)

According to *Afary* (2022), recent waves of protest in Iran must be understood in the broader context of public discontent with the Islamic Republic’s internal and external policies, as outlined in Chapter 3. Iranian women have consistently played a central role in major protest movements over the past four decades, often appearing at the forefront. Their growing prominence is the consequence of more profound changes in social norms and gender relations.

In an effort to take more control over their bodies and life decisions, women are increasingly choosing to postpone or refuse marriage and motherhood. These personal shifts intersect with public dissent, driving women's active participation in both general social protests and feminist demands for rights and equality. While there are more structured protest actions, there are also forms of „non-movement” that challenge dominant norms without necessarily taking the shape of formal mobilization. Examples of this include premarital relationships, the illegal keeping of dogs and the use of colorful clothing to protest mandatory hijab laws, all of which are acts that symbolically oppose the gender and moral norms of the Islamic Republic. These routine acts form a repertoire of cultural resistance and contest the regime's core beliefs (cf. Afary 2022: 17)

Sajadi (2023) highlights that discriminatory laws around hijab, inheritance and divorce have remained central to the Iranian women's movement since the Islamic revolution (cf. 2023: 1). One women's rights campaign in the mid-2000s, the One Million Signatures Campaign, used various strategies to push for women's legal equality and reform of the patriarchal and discriminatory legal system. Launched in August 2006, the campaign emerged after the disappointing end of President Mohammad Khatami's second term and the election of the conservative populist Mahmud Ahmadinejad as president. While the campaign attracted national and international attention, it faced strong opposition from the state, leading to the arrest of several activists. Despite attempts to engage political elites, the movement ultimately struggled due to increasing state repression and the persistent enforcement of gender segregation and social control policies. The campaign pioneered a decentralized, horizontal organizing structure rooted in everyday interactions. Activists engaged directly with women in parks, buses and local communities to raise awareness of discriminatory laws. These efforts created informal feminist networks and decentralized, flexible structures that became crucial for sustaining feminist resistance under authoritarian conditions, eventually influencing the structure of the WLF Movement (cf. Moqadam 2025: 11-13). During the years following the Green Movement, the Iranian women's movement consisted of small, scattered groups of women, hindered by limited resources, poor access to public spaces and significant restrictions on organizing. Leading activists faced arrests, severe legal sentences and in some cases, forced exile. (cf. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023: 412p; Sajadi 2023: 1f.). In response to growing repression and exclusion from formal politics, many women turned to what *Miraftab* (2004; 2006) calls „informal politics”, meaning grassroots organizing outside state-sanctioned arenas. When denied access, they created „invented spaces” in neighbourhoods, homes and digital platforms.

In the 2010s, increasing access to high-speed internet and mobile technology created new opportunities for feminist resistance. Activists, while still physically restricted, launched online protests, educational campaigns and webinars to raise awareness on gender-based violence and legal inequality. These digital efforts expanded what *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 13p.) calls „feminist friendship networks”, bringing together a broader demographic, including older generations, exiled activists and marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ communities (cf. Moqadam 2025: 13pf.). These complex networks of activism and care, both online and offline, were essential to maintaining resistance. Many activists continued to engage through digital platforms, especially those who were forced into exile following the Green Movement. These online platforms developed into vital resources for maintaining activism, building international ties and elevating feminist voices outside of Iran. According to *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 15), Iranian feminist tactics have been characterized by their capacity to shift between formal, informal and digital arenas of resistance, enabling activists to adapt to shifting political and social circumstances. Since then, feminist attorneys and activists have used digital platforms to launch focused legal campaigns. This illustrates how technology has become essential to modern resistance repertoires (cf. Afary 2022: 17). Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad is one of the feminist activists living abroad. In 2014, she started a social media campaign titled „My Stealthy Freedom“. The campaign encouraged women to wear a white headscarf on Wednesdays in protest of the Islamic Republic’s mandatory veiling laws, building on the daily resistance of millions of women to gendered state violence.

Strategically, in order to increase awareness of discriminatory laws, activists of the One Million Signatures Campaign interacted directly with women in parks, buses and local communities. These initiatives produced decentralized, adaptable structures and unofficial feminist networks that were essential for maintaining feminist resistance in authoritarian environments, ultimately impacting the WLF Movement’s organizational structure (cf. Moqadam 2025: 11-13). The Iranian women’s movement in the years after the Green Movement was made up of small, dispersed groups of women who were hampered by a lack of funding, restricted access to public areas and severe organizational restrictions. Prominent activists were subjected to detentions, harsh legal penalties and, in certain situations, forced exile. (cf. Sajadi 2023: 1f.; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023: 412f.). Thus, the rise of social media has facilitated new, fluid forms of resistance. As *Amir-Ebrahimi & Hufschmied* (cf. 2018: 30-32) note, these are often short-term,

individual actions that gain momentum and visibility online, amplifying their impact beyond the moment of performance.

In 2017, the „Girls of Enghelab Street” movement became a symbol of the fight against mandatory hijab, a series of demonstrations from December 2017 to March 2019, where diverse groups of women climbed up on utility boxes in Tehran and other Iranian cities, removing or waving their scarves in public spaces like main streets and subways (cf. Ooryad 2020: o.S; Khatam 2023: 302; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023: 413). In response, however, the government arrested over 35 activists and imposed harsh penalties. Internationally, exiled activists had amplified the movement’s message, drawing attention to gender inequality and advocating for change by engaging with global human rights organizations, the media and political figures (cf. Sajadi 2023: 1f.). *Sadeghi-Boroujerdi* (2023) views the campaigns as advocating for civil disobedience, public defiance and resistance to the mandatory veiling laws. As a new generation of women and men, who had grown up under the Islamist social order, came of age, the appeal of gradual reform strategies began to fade. In response, civil disobedience against mandatory veiling laws, gender segregation and state authorities gained momentum (cf. 2023: 413f.). As *Kamel* (cf. 2024: 22f.) examines, feminist activism in Iran during the early 2010s shifted away from traditional collective organizing toward more individualized and visually symbolic resistance spread via social media. These digital campaigns, especially those led by figures like Masih Alinejad, often revolved around personal branding and political positioning. Although they attracted wide participation, their centralized and ideologically framed nature excluded certain demographics and increased participants’ vulnerability to state punishment. Unlike earlier movements such as One Million Signatures Campaign that emphasized grassroots coalition-building and collaboration, these newer forms of digital activism are shaped by the logic of social media, favouring visibility, metrics and influencer-like engagement. This has led to the rise of networked feminism, meaning decentralized, leaderless and emotionally driven activism centred on sharing personal experiences of gendered oppression.

In the 2010s, while feminist activism in Iran increasingly embraced digital platforms, on-the-ground collective efforts did not disappear. However, these grassroots initiatives shifted their focus from national legal reforms toward addressing local social issues. Many feminist groups worked on raising awareness about gender-based violence, providing support for abused women and conducting workshops in different cities. Notable examples include the creation of

private shelters, the „Harass Watch” campaign in 2018 to combat sexual violence in public spaces and the Bidarzani platform, which emerged as a trusted feminist media outlet (cf. Kamel 2024: 23f.).

Furthermore, Iranian feminists have launched their own version of the #MeToo movement, challenging deep-rooted norms around sexual violence and victim-blaming. In a society where survivors of sexual assault can face punishment and accusations of guilt, a new generation of women has begun to publicly share their experiences of harassment, abuse and rape. They have gone further by naming prominent men as perpetrators, including members of the IRGC, clerics, parliamentarians, as well as artists, academics and writers. Like movements in the Global North, many of the accused were in positions of authority and the survivors were often their students, assistants or mentees (cf. Afary 2022: 18). Unlike earlier digital campaigns, this wave of activism revealed the limitations of loosely connected online efforts. It relied on feminist organizers to offer emotional support, manage legal struggles and fact-check disclosures (cf. Kamel 2024: 24). The Iranian regime was aware of the growing strength of the women’s movement and employed various repressive tactics to suppress it. These include arresting and imprisoning activists, censoring media coverage, intimidating supportive organizations and shutting down online platforms linked to feminist campaigns (cf. Afary 2022: 23).

The beginning of Raisi’s presidency in August 2021 triggered a further intensification of state repression, characterized by a militarization of key administrative positions and a systematic crackdown on dissent. Raisi’s administration strategically placed high-ranking IRGC officers in provincial and city governorships, effectively consolidating control over security and coordinating repressive forces, including the police, IRGC and Basij. This militaristic shift signalled a move towards more extreme hardline policies enforced through heightened violence. Furthermore, this period witnessed an escalation in the persecution of human rights lawyers and civil society leaders, with prominent figures like the human rights lawyers Nasrin Sotoudeh and Narges Mohammadi being imprisoned. The regime also executed numerous long-term prisoners, used violent force against water scarcity protests in Khuzestan and Isfahan and brutally suppressed demonstrations following a building collapse in Abadan in May 2022. (cf. Kazemzadeh 2023: 134p.) In parallel, the government intensified efforts to reverse secular attitudes through cultural policies. A key measure was the „hijab and chastity law” in July 2022, which expanded surveillance and tightened enforcement of dress codes in public spaces.

In the months leading up to Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death, reports emerged of increasing pressure on women by the regime. Young women increasingly resisted morality police enforcement and viral videos of police violence drew widespread attention (Khatam 2023: 302). These developments severely restricted civic space but also triggered a new wave of feminist defiance. Women began reclaiming both physical and digital spaces, forming decentralized solidarity networks (cf. Moqadam 2025: 15).

One such incident, which gained widespread attention, involved a video of a confrontation on a bus in the capital city. In the video, 28-year-old Sepideh Rashno is assaulted by a member of the morality police for not wearing a hijab. The video quickly went viral, leading to Rashno's arrest, mistreatment and forced apology on state television. In an interview with the Guardian, journalist and political analyst *Negar Mortazavi* her arrest marked a pivotal moment as it underscored the regime's harsh enforcement of the mandatory hijab. While intended to serve as a warning to women resisting the state's dress code, the incident only fueled widespread anger. This resentment, which had been building for years, erupted following the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini (cf. Swash 2022). *Tohidi* (cf. 2023: 47) emphasizes the connectivity and continuity between the actions and struggles in the Iranian women's movement over the last decades, resulting in the WLF Movement in 2022. *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 4) argues that Iranian women's resistance has never been confined to single events or locations. Instead, it unfolds across a wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, adapting to each moment's particular constraints. Parallely, the combination of authoritarian control and further public frustration due to economic dissatisfaction and political disillusionment created the conditions in which the WLF Movement would soon erupt (cf. Moqadam 2025: 15)

According to the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran (UN II FFM Iran), Jina (Mahsa) Amini was arrested on 13 September 2022 by Iran's morality police for allegedly wearing an „improper” hijab. She collapsed shortly after arriving at the Vozara detention center and was later transferred to a hospital, where her family was later informed that she was already brain-dead. Her father publicly reported seeing signs of physical abuse, including bruises and bleeding (UN II FFM Iran 2024: 3f.). She died on September 16, 2022, three days after her arrest, reportedly from head injuries likely inflicted during her arrest. The authorities have blocked independent investigations into her death, which resonated with many Iranians who have faced state and police violence (cf. Orazani & Teymoori 2024 3f.). The UN II FFM Iran (2024) concluded that the Iranian authorities failed to conduct a credible

investigation and instead actively sought to obscure the circumstances of her death (cf. 2024: 4). Despite the Iranian regime's alleged practice of silencing families of women affected by state violence, as noted by *Kazemzadeh* (2023), the journalists Niloufar Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi played a crucial role in documenting the arrest of Jina (Mahsa) Amini. Their reporting, coupled with the parents' public account, countered the regime's efforts at narrative control, resulting in the journalists' detention (cf. 2023: 157; cf. Tohidi 2023: 30).

As Footage of Jina (Mahsa) Amini's lifeless body was shared across various social media platforms, a wave of protests across Iran emerged. The widespread protests in Iran were intensified by public dissatisfaction with the Moral Police, as well as by the perceived lack of credibility in the explanations offered by the Central Command of the Islamic Republic Police Force (FARAJA) regarding Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death. These factors, combined with the force's prior record of misconduct, contributed to the rapid escalation of nationwide unrest (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran, 2022: 5). Besides a small protest that occurred outside the hospital in Teheran, people of her hometown of Saqqez in Kurdistan took to the streets (cf. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023: 404f.). During her funeral, people began to protest, women symbolically removed their hijabs, cut their hair and chanted „Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” (Woman, Life, Freedom), a Kurdish protest slogan with roots to the Kurdish women's liberation movement in Northern Kurdistan against the Turkish state in the early 1980s, later mentioned and interpreted in the writings of Abdullah Ocalan, the Kurdish leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (cf. Radpey 2023; Orazani & Teymoori 2024: 3f.).

The marginalization of Kurdish identity in Iran is examined critically by *Mohammadpour* (cf. 2024: 93, 97). Although Kurdish names are not officially prohibited, their visibility is restricted by bureaucratic measures like pre-approved name lists, which are an example of larger assimilationist policies aimed at non-Persian communities. As a result, Jina Amini's Kurdish name and upbringing came to represent a larger struggle that the prevailing Persian feminist discourse frequently overlooked. The Kurdish phrase “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” through Kurdish-majority cities following the tragic death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini. Its Farsi translation, “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”, swiftly spread throughout many Iranian cities and towns, developing into a broad movement. The protests swiftly grew to include more general complaints against the Islamic Republic, such as economic hardship, restricted social and political freedoms, especially for women and discrimination based on ethnicity and religion. They were initially spurred by outrage over the brutality of the morality police. According to *Orazani & Teymoori*

(2024), Jina Amini stood in for a number of marginalized groups in Iranian society. Her identity as a Kurdish Sunni Muslim woman from a marginalized region brought attention to ethnic, linguistic, religious and gendered discrimination in a predominantly Shia state. This intersection of oppressions may have resonated with various facets of Iranian society, creating a broad sense of solidarity and igniting the countrywide demonstrations that followed her death (cf. 2024: 3-5).

Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2023) describes how the movement constructed a „chain of equivalence” at a rhetorical and performative level, connecting demands for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures with broader aspirations for democratic self-governance, civic equality, ethno-national autonomy and social justice. This framework created a clear antagonistic divide between „the people” and the ruling elite (cf. 2023: 414). By uniting these diverse demands, the movement increased its appeal and promoted unity among different societal groups in a call for systemic change. The WLF Movement represents both a change toward a new form of political participation and the legacy of earlier Iranian feminist struggles. As *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 15f.) argues, the movement has, through what she calls „fractal scaling”, replicated itself across both physical and digital spaces, adapting everyday acts and tools into forms of resistance. This has made it possible for the movement to grow naturally and fluidly across regional, national and international borders, turning both public and private spaces into places of feminist resistance.

4.2 Movement Framing and Identity

This chapter reviews the existing literature on how the WLF Movement has been described, interpreted and understood in academic and journalistic sources. It examines the ways in which the movement can be defined and is framed by others, meaning, what its demands are, how it organizes and who participates.

4.2.1 Demands and Objective

One feature of the WLF Movement is the nature of its demands, which differ from those of earlier movements. Rather than calling for institutional reforms or electoral changes, protesters were making revolutionary demands that imagine a political future beyond the Islamic Republic (cf. Molana et al. 2023: 2). Beyond opposing authoritarian rule, many demonstrators were calling for secular, social-democratic alternatives to the current system, which they view

as corrupt. Slogans such as „Down with the dictator“, „Death to Khamenei“ and „We do not want the Islamic Republic“ suggest a broader rejection of the existing system (cf. Tohidi 30p; 48). The movement’s demands were rooted in systemic dissatisfaction that goes beyond gender-based repression. *Tohidi* (2023) sees „characteristics of a revolutionary uprising or of a revolt against something more than the compulsory nature of the hijab“ (2023: 30p.). While opposition to the compulsory hijab was a catalyst, the protests draw on decades of intersectional struggle against gender-based discrimination, economic injustice and authoritarian rule (cf. Molana et al. 2023: 2). *Assa* (2023) frames the Iranian state’s control over women as a „femicide machine”: a systemic apparatus of violence that uses veiling, spatial segregation and the criminalization of bodily autonomy to maintain political power. This machinery exploits women’s reproductive and care labour, reinforcing cycles of female poverty and subordination. Following Jina (Mahsa) Amini’s death, there was a national mobilization driven by long-standing social, economic and political grievances rather than a single-issue protest. Both domestically and abroad, protests spread from city centers to border towns, classrooms and workplaces. *Zarbighehhamami & Abbasi* (cf. 2023: 124) refer to *Bayat’s* (2010) concept of „street politics”. In this context, public space becomes the stage for grassroots contestation of dominant power structures, making the movement a bottom-up challenge to Iran’s social and political order. One cultural expression that encapsulated these diverse demands was the song *Baraye* by Shervin Hajipour. As *Tohidi* (cf. 2023: 34) notes, the song functioned as a symbolic manifesto of the movement. Its lyrics, drawn from social media posts, articulated a range of everyday concerns and structural criticisms.

4.2.2 Decentralized and Leaderless

The WLF Movement’s lack of leadership is another characteristic, since it functioned without centralized leadership, in contrast to earlier Iranian uprisings like the 2009 Green Movement, which depended on specific leaders like Mir-Hossein Moussavi. *Orazani & Teymoori* (cf. 2024: 6-8) explains that centralized movements are at risk because the Iranian regime has a history of targeting leaders to suppress dissent. *Molana et al.* (cf. 2023: 2) note that rather than being organized by official organizations or well-known individuals, the protests were organized informally through word-of-mouth and decentralized social media networks, enabling greater grassroots participation. The movement’s use of neighbourhood intersections and other local protest sites, which made it easier for young women in particular to move around and engage in protests, is another indication of its decentralized structure. Although this

localized form of mobilization gave participants more flexibility and safety, it also made it more challenging to estimate overall turnout and publicly show the full scope of support. (cf. Khatam 2023: 303) Despite limited data on the social background of participants, the wide geographic spread of protests, from major urban centers to small towns and peripheral provinces, indicates that the WLF Movement extended beyond the discontented middle class to include large segments of the working class and various ethnic groups. It is considered the largest uprising since the 1979 Revolution, with demonstrations reaching not only major cities, but also rural areas and conservative strongholds, as well as ethnic minority regions like Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchistan. In many of these cities, protests occurred on average every three days, marking them as vital centers of political mobilization (cf. Molana et al. 2023: 2; Khatam 2023: 303). The lack of a clear hierarchy is often seen as a strategic advantage in the Islamic Republic. The regime quickly arrests and silences opposition leaders. However, without a central leader, it became hard to maintain long-term coordination, unify strategies, or keep the momentum going in different areas. As a result, even though the movement received broad moral and practical support from various ethnic groups and labor sectors, calls for strikes only saw limited and mostly symbolic participation. Many people were reluctant to risk arrest or possible death, especially without clear leadership or a defined vision for political alternatives (cf. Tohidi 2023: 50).

4.2.3 Intersectionality and Solidarity

Another characteristic of the WLF Movement is its intersectional nature. Intersectionality is a concept used to understand how different forms of inequality and discrimination can overlap. It examines how social positions and experiences are shaped by categories such as gender, race, class and sexual orientation rather than being distinct. The term was introduced by *Crenshaw* (1989) to highlight how Black women often experience overlapping forms of oppression that cannot be fully understood by looking at race or gender alone. Protesters were not only challenging gender-based oppression but were also responding to state violence and surveillance as it relates to factors such as age, sexuality, class, ethnicity and geographic location (cf. Molana et al. 2023: 2; Tohidi 2023: 36). *Leloup* (2023: 64) highlights that the WLF Movement is marked by the broad participation of diverse social groups, which sets it apart from earlier Iranian uprisings. While the movement's slogan emphasizes women, its scope extends far beyond gender. According to *Tohidi* (cf. 2023: 33), however, the significant presence of women in the protests stems from decades of gender-based oppression, a growing

feminist consciousness and the gendered nature of the event that sparked the movement, the killing of Jina (Mahsa) Amini for allegedly violating hijab laws. While *Mehan* (2024) calls it the „first counter-revolution led by women” (2024: 1), *Bayat* (2023) states, that „this is neither a ‘feminist revolution’ per se, nor simply the revolt of Generation Z, nor merely a protest against the mandatory hijab. This is a movement to reclaim life, a struggle to liberate free and dignified existence from an internal colonization. As the primary objects of this colonization, women have become the major protagonists of the liberation movement.” (Bayat 2023)

The intersectional character of the WLF Movement is evident both in the diversity of its participants and in its symbolic figure, Jina (Mahsa) Amini. As a young, Kurdish, Sunni Muslim woman, Amini’s identity embodies multiple dimensions of marginalization: gender, ethnicity, religion and generational status, all of which are subject to forms of oppression within Iran’s Shia theocratic system (cf. Tohidi 2023: 36). Similarly, *Hamidi* (cf. 2023: 746) sees the WLF Movement as a place where historically marginalized and intersectional identities gain significance, particularly in feminist and scholarly discourse. The WLF Movement, according to *Mohammadpour* (cf. 2024: 83; 86), signaled a change in Iran’s feminist movement by extending resistance beyond urban areas with a Persian majority to marginalized areas like Kurdistan and Balochistan. Although central, secular feminist voices dominated earlier anti-hijab activism, they frequently ignored the unique challenges faced by ethnic minorities. The WLF Movement challenged this by bringing peripheral regions and their demands, such as cultural rights and protection from state violence, into the centre of national feminist discourse. Thus, the movement pushed for a more inclusive and expansive definition of rights in Iran by advancing an intersectional form of activism that connected gender justice with ethnic and regional struggles. He argues that the Iranian women’s movement has historically centred a homogenized idea of „the Iranian woman“, which is equalized to the Persian majority of the country and excludes the lived realities of Kurdish and other ethnic minority women. The socioeconomic exclusion of regions like Kurdistan and Balochistan, marked by high poverty, unemployment and disproportionate incarceration and executions, further highlights the intersection of ethnic, gendered and class-based oppression. The movement, therefore, not only called for gender justice but also challenged the nationalism embedded in mainstream feminist narratives. The state used its usual tactic of securitizing ethnicity by accusing activists in Kurdistan and Baluchistan of separatism to sow division. Despite this, a strong sense of solidarity across racial and religious divides emerged. Slogans such as „Kurd, Baluch and Azeri

united for freedom and equality” and „From Kurdistan to Tehran, the attacks against women continue” may reflect this spirit of unity and mutual recognition (Tohidi 2023: 37).

Furthermore, the movement addressed a long-standing issue within Iranian feminism: the lack of male support in the women’s movement. According to *Khatam* (2023), men’s active participation in the WLF Movement is a result of their personal experiences with economic hardship and state control, in addition to their solidarity with women. The morality police have also directly targeted young men for things like their hairstyles or for interacting with women outside of their families. Their motivation to join the movement is further fueled by the extreme economic pressures they face, which frequently keep them from becoming financially independent or starting a family (cf. 2023: 302). While *Khatam* (2023: 300p.) highlights the common sense of solidarity among protest participants, united in their opposition to the morality police, *Dabiri* (cf. 2023: 2) refers to this unified identity as „collective pain“, where diverse groups recognize their shared struggles and aspirations under the movement. Even traditional veiled women, often seen as aligned with conservative values, joined secular activists in this effort. This inclusivity transformed the movement into a demand for justice and structural change that transcends individual grievances (cf. Bayat 2023).

Citing *Madani* (2022), an imprisoned Iranian sociologist, who, on the 100th day of the WLF Movement, published an analysis of this movement while comparing it to the previous uprisings, *Tohidi* (2023) explains that this movement has evolved from a youth-led revolt into a broader, more inclusive national movement. Madani characterizes it as a „new social movement“ with the potential to unite various past struggles, drawing from four decades of protest experience and building a cumulative repertoire through a process of synergy (cf. Tohidi 2023: 33, citing Madani 2022). This intergenerational „collective pain” is rooted in Iran’s protest history, particularly in the grassroots activism of the “Justice-Seeking Mothers”, such as the “Mothers of Khavaran”, who began organizing in the 1980s after the regime’s mass executions of political dissidents. Inspired by Argentina’s “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo”, they gathered to demand justice for their disappeared children and later inspired similar groups like the “Mothers of Laleh Park” and “Mothers of Aban”. These collectives formed non-hierarchical, counter-hegemonic networks that transcended class, ethnicity and religious divisions. Their actions laid important groundwork for the political consciousness and inclusive organizing seen in the WLF Movement (cf. Assa 2023: 64).

In addition, during the WLF Movement, public spaces such as streets became sites for queer visibility. One image from near Qom, a centre of religious authority in Iran, shows a person holding a rainbow flag above their head. Similar photographs from across Iran show the rainbow flag displayed in various contexts, including during the government-organized demonstration on 22 Bahman, the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution (cf. Hamidi 2023: 748).

4.2.4 Youth Protests

Furthermore, a key feature of the WLF Movement is the central role of young people, particularly Iran's Generation Z. This generation, born between 1996 and 2012, has emerged as the driving force behind the protests, shaped by a distinct set of challenges (cf. Tohidi 2023: 38). As of 2023, 22 percent of Iran's population is aged between 15 and 29, while further 25 percent were under the age of 15 (cf. UNICEF n.d.). In Iran, youth politics have increasingly become a collective struggle for personal autonomy and a secure transition into adulthood, a path often blocked by widespread unemployment, economic instability and political repression. Despite being highly educated, many young people face bleak economic prospects. The crisis is especially severe among young women: approximately 40% of girls aged 14 to 25 are neither in education nor employment, while 25% of boys in the same age group remain unemployed (cf. Khatam 2010: 302).

A generational gap contributes to this political and economic disillusionment. *Dabiri* (2023) points out that although Iranian youth have grown up with few personal liberties, they are increasingly exposed to global lifestyles through digital platforms. More radical calls for change have been sparked by the growing gap between their aspirations and the restrictions imposed by the regime (cf. Dabiri 2023: 5). *Bayat* (2023) identifies key „youth affordances“, meaning traits such as adaptability, energy and fewer familial responsibilities, that make this demographic particularly capable of engaging in protests. Furthermore, young activists use digital tools strategically, by using social media, smartphones and encrypted messaging to organize protests, share information and build resistance networks (cf. Mehan 2024: 1). One of the most significant developments within the movement was the formation of the United Youth of Iran (UYI), also referred to as the Neighbourhood Youth Alliance. This coalition of grassroots youth groups emerged during the 2022 uprising and played a critical role in shaping

both protest coordination and political vision. The UYI published a 43-point manifesto in December 2022 that demanded the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and the installation of a secular, democratic government founded on international human rights treaties (cf. Sinaiee 2022).

Tohidi (cf. 2023: 38p.) concludes that Iranian youth's political consciousness has also been influenced by their parents' lived experiences, which were characterized by state violence during earlier movements. In this way, Gen Z's activism draws from both the collective memory of previous uprisings and family history, making it both intergenerational and digitally informed. Another factor is the transformation of how this generation perceives public and private spaces. Unlike older generations, today's Iranian youth do not view these domains as clearly separated. For them, public protest is an extension of the autonomy they experience in their personal lives, like in family settings and friendships (cf. Hamidi 2023: 9). According to *Hamidi* (cf. 2023: 9p.), the Iranian Generation Z faces a political system that restricts its vitality through measures like compulsory hijab laws and gender segregation, ergo policies that may symbolize a broader denial of youth freedoms. Yet, it is precisely this repression that has propelled them into action, making them key participants of contemporary protest movements and prominent agents of social transformation in Iran.

4.2.5 Global Solidarity

The transnational dimension of the WLF Movement is marked by a high level of global attention and solidarity. While earlier nationwide protests between 2017 and 2021 received limited international coverage, the WLF Movement has sparked widespread support from international activists, political figures, feminist leaders and the public. By disseminating photos and videos from within Iran, social media was instrumental. As *Khodaei* (cf. 2023:11) notes, years of anti-hijab campaigns and daily opposition had already challenged the regime's attempt to defend mandatory veiling as a cultural custom. In addition to covering events in Iran, the international media was instrumental in giving activists a platform through talk shows and analytical segments. In neighbouring countries, this transnational resonance has been particularly noticeable. As part of a larger fight against authoritarianism and patriarchal violence, women in Turkey staged demonstrations denouncing the Islamic Republic's treatment of women and expressing outrage over Amini's death (cf. Duvar English 2022).

Similarly, Afghan women, operating under severe constraints following the Taliban's return to power, voiced their solidarity by drawing direct parallels between the repression of women in Iran and Afghanistan. Their public declarations and slogans called for collective resistance and expressed the common experience of gender control imposed by the state (cf. IranWire 2022). In the Kurdish-administered regions of northern Syria, women held demonstrations invoking the slogan „Jin, Jiyan, Azadî“. (cf. Reuters 2022).

The Iranian diaspora and digitally connected feminist networks also played a major role in shaping transnational solidarity outside of the region. More than 150 cities around the world, including Berlin, Toronto and Los Angeles, saw large-scale protests that were frequently organized by diaspora organizations. According to *Elmore* (cf. 2024: 2f.), the WLF Movement exemplified a new form of transnational activism in the digital age, marked by online demonstrations, international awareness campaigns and initiatives for global solidarity. These networks facilitate the distribution of protest materials, support symbolic actions and strengthen international alliances. They often do not rely on official institutions. However *Molana et al.* (cf. 2023: 2) also note that a large portion of the global media, especially in the Global North, still perpetuates orientalist narratives, which frequently lessen Iranian women's resistance to oversimplified depictions centred on the veil.

4.3 Initial Repertoires of Resistance

With a focus on the early repertoires of resistance that arose after Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death, this subchapter examines how the early repertoires of the WLF Movement have been described in scholarly and journalistic literature. Decentralized, grassroots mobilization shaped early protest practices instead of formal leadership or centralized planning. The literature outlines demonstrators' acts of protest, which included a variety of digital and educational resistance, symbolic gestures and street demonstrations. The descriptions and interpretations of these practices from the body of current research are reviewed in the following subsections.

4.3.1 Street Demonstrations

Street demonstrations formed a core repertoire of the WLF Movement. The NGO *Human Rights Activists in Iran* (cf. 2022: 9) published a report on the first 82 days of the movement. During these initial days, demonstrations were recorded in 160 cities across all 31 provinces of Iran, totalling 544 mass gatherings, each involving more than 30 participants. *Khatam* (cf. 2023: 303) offers a detailed estimate of protest participation based on the 40-day commemoration of Jina Mahsa Amini's death. On October 26, 2022, protests occurred in 80 neighbourhoods across Tehran alone. With an average of 2,500 people per neighbourhood, the number of protestors in Tehran reached approximately 200,000, equalling nearly 10% of the city's youth population (aged 15–30). Extrapolating from this event and including additional off-street protests in schools, universities and workplaces, *Khatam* estimates that 1.5 million people participated in nationwide street demonstrations in the first months of the movement. *Moqadam* (cf. 2025: 16) explains that for the first time since the 1979 revolution, local protest committees were established across the country. These committees coordinated demonstrations away from central squares and instead focused on residential areas and smaller streets, which made it more difficult for security forces to contain the protests. This decentralized infrastructure was supported by informal networks formed through everyday social

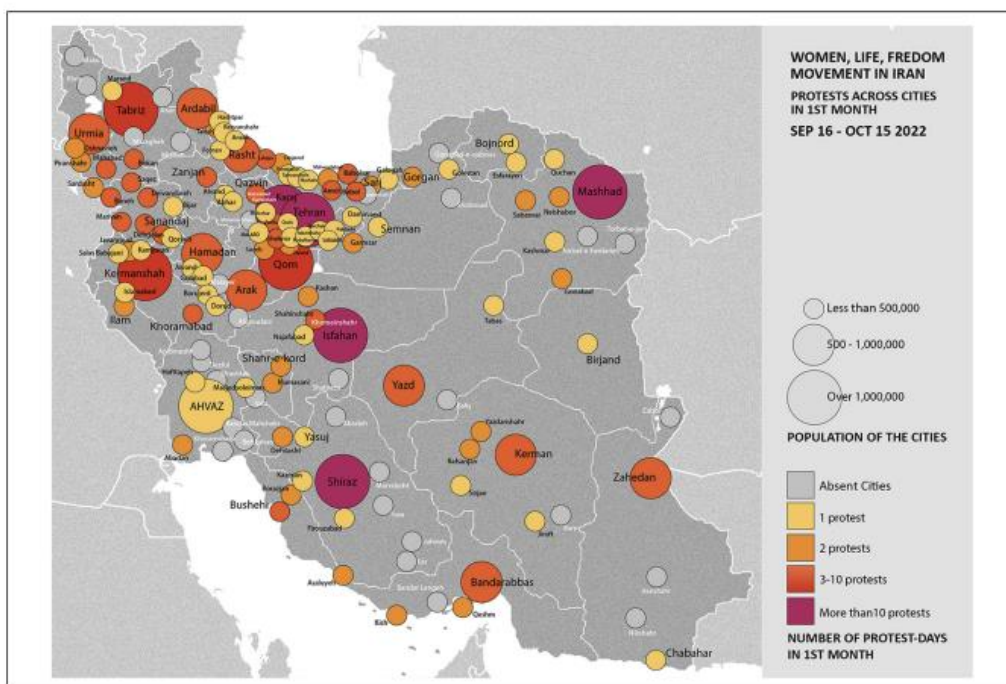


Figure 1: Number of protests across cities in the first month of the movement (*Khatam* 2023: 303)

relationships among classmates, colleagues, neighbours and online communities (cf. Khodaei

2023: 7). These connections enabled protestors to organize autonomously and without reliance on formal leadership.

4.3.2 Embodied Acts of Defiance and Artistic Protest

Moreover, the WLF Movement adopted a range of symbolic bodily acts to express its dissent. Among these, dance emerged as a key repertoire. Usually restricted to private spaces, dancing became a form of political resistance, openly defying legal and social restrictions. Its public performance during protests functioned as a challenge to state-imposed norms concerning bodily expression (cf. Talattof 2023: 64; Moqadam 2025: 17). Moreover, cutting one's hair became a symbolic gesture of both mourning and protest. As *Chafiq* (2022) explains, this ritual (*gisuborān*) draws on mythological and cultural roots in Iranian society, where hair is linked to mourning and renewal (cf. Chafiq 2022). While this tradition has faded in much of Iran, it continues to be practiced, to a lesser extent, in regions where ethnic minorities live, such as Kurdistan and Lorestan. In the wake of Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death, this ancestral mourning practice was revived. This act became an illustration of wider collective grief and resistance, especially against the state's compulsory hijab laws. Mourners across Iran, including those at gravesites of slain protesters, adopted the ritual by cutting their hair (cf. Mehrabi 2023: 116).

Another visible and widespread tactic was the public removal and burning of the hijab. The practice, which began in the city of Sari, quickly spread nationwide following Amini's death (cf. Batyari 2025: 12). Women participating in protests removed their headscarves, sometimes burning them during gatherings at night a further collective defiance against laws enforcing mandatory veiling (cf. Khatam 2023: 300). Shared widely on social media, the acts gained further visibility and support, particularly after public figures, including actresses, joined in (cf. Khodaei 2023: 9).

Many acts of protest were shaped by striking visual gestures, such as pictures of women burning headscarves, dancing defiantly, or standing bareheaded in the streets, rather than depending only on conventional slogans or large-scale demonstrations. These pictures became symbolic references that demonstrators tried to embody after they were extensively circulated on social media. As one anonymous protester („L.”) explains in an essay translated by *Doostdar* (2022), women entered the streets not just as individuals but as visual figures of resistance,

helping to build a collective feminist iconography that sustained the movement's momentum and identity (cf. Doostdar 2022). In this way, photographs did not only document events, but became tools for „the political body of women” (Doostdar 2022: para. 19). As *Izadi & Dryden* (cf. 2024: 9p.) argue, the image of Jina (Mahsa) Amini became a code of the protest itself. Protesters used multimodal resources, like placards, drawings, flags and embodied forms such as cutting hair or removing hijabs.

Moreover, students at universities contributed to the musical dimension of the movement. One of the most iconic cultural expressions was the song *Baraye* („For”) by Shervin Hajipour, which became an unofficial anthem of the movement, widely adopted during demonstrations and circulated across digital platforms (cf. Moqadam 2025: 17). Another example is the song *Sorud-e Azadi* (Freedom Anthem), an Iranian version of the 1973 Chilean protest song *El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido*. This song, initially composed in support of Salvador Allende's movement, was later used in various protest contexts, including in Iran before the 1979 revolution. Students shared the song on social media with the caption „This is how we will hold class!” as they boycotted official classes. Musically, these protest pieces are characterized by anthem-like structures, emphasizing collective identity, as individual voices are merged in a multivocal chorus. Visual elements in the music videos depict university environments, with participants concealing their identities for safety. Blurred faces and distant filming underscore the risks involved while symbolizing the presence of students in the protest movement (cf. Siamdoust 2023: 769f.). However, music, as a form of protest, resonated widely beyond university rooms. *Miri Ashtiani's* (2023) analysis of 179 protest songs produced or reclaimed between September 2022 and January 2023 highlights themes of bodily autonomy and anti-authoritarianism. Lyrics called for solidarity across ethnic groups and challenged the state's instrumentalization of religion. Protest songs also served as calls to action and expressions of hope for a freer future, with recurring motifs of resistance, solidarity and envisioned liberation (cf. Miri Ashtiani 2023: 86, 90–93).

4.3.3 Resistance in Educational Spaces

Generally, educational spaces played a significant role in the expansion and visibility of the WLF Movement. In schools and classrooms, teenage school girls organized collective actions such as chanting anti-regime slogans, removing mandatory hijabs and organizing

demonstrations. Their early and visible involvement also made them among the first victims of state repression (cf. Moqadam 2025: 17). Across the country, students tore down portraits of state leaders, removed their hijabs, staged sit-ins and chanted anti-regime slogans within school premises and nearby streets. These actions disrupted the highly controlled environment of Iranian educational institutions, which have long served as instruments of ideological reproduction. One notable incident includes female students in Karaj expelling a regional education official from their school and students in another school disrupting a speech by a member of the Basij by removing their hijabs and chanting slogans. The Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Unions condemned the killings of students and, in some cases, teachers joined the protests (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 36-38.).

Moreover, universities became key sites of protest in the WLF Movement, particularly in the context of Iran's tightly controlled public sphere, where opportunities for collective dissent are severely limited. Undergraduate and postgraduate students organized marches, sit-ins and demonstrations across nearly 200 campuses (cf. Hamidi 2023: 8p.). Students from dozens of universities across the country published statements and engaged in class boycotts, protesting state violence and the arrest of fellow students. Faculty members also voiced their support: over 600 university professors and academic associations signed letters demanding the release of detainees and an end to disciplinary actions against students (cf. 2022: Human Rights Activists in Iran 458pf.).

4.4.4 Digital Resistance

Digital platforms such as X (formally Twitter), Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp emerged as another repertoire during the WLF Movement, functioning as both organizational tools and a site of protest. In the absence of centralized leadership or formal organizational structures, social media enabled a horizontal model of coordination. An analysis of Twitter posting data between September 2022 and March 2023 revealed recurring themes of freedom, solidarity and national identity, unified under the slogan „Woman, Life, Freedom“. In Iran and throughout the diaspora, protesters used social media sites like Twitter to rally supporters, spread calls for protests and strikes and voice their demands for systemic change and justice (cf. Danesh & Athari 2024: 6-11).

Dzhambazova (cf. 2023: 138) emphasizes that online networks became crucial spaces to voice dissent and coordinate resistance. Similarly, *Hamidi* (cf. 2023: 6-8) notes how younger generations, who are politically active and digitally literate, can create momentum through decentralized online tactics. With activists recording events, sharing videos and shaping the protest narrative, these networks allowed the movement to move from individual awareness to a collective sphere. Importantly, the movement deliberately avoided using traditional media that was tightly regulated and controlled by the government in favour of using social media to organize resistance and spread demands.

4.4 Repertoires of Repression

This chapter examines the state's repertoires of repression in existing literature. The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran (UN II FFM), whose reports from March 2024 offer a thorough account of human rights violations committed during and after the protests, is a key source of this analysis. The Human Rights Activists in Iran report from 2022, which details the movement's initial 82 days, complements this.

An extensive and multi-layered apparatus of repression was the Iranian state's response to the WLF Movement. At least 551 civilians were killed between September 2022 and September 2023, including 49 women and 68 children, according to the UN II FFM (2024) report. At least 26 provinces had recorded deaths, with areas with marginalized ethnic populations like West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Sistan and Balochestan having particularly high death rates. On September 30, 2022, 104 people died in Zahedan, making it the deadliest day ever (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 4). The crackdown was accompanied by widespread arrests. A wide range of civil society members, including activists, journalists, political dissidents, labour organizers, trade unionists and attorneys, were among the estimated 18,242 people detained nationwide. Many of them were detained without access to due process or legal counsel (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 161–162).

4.4.1 Narrative Control and Delegitimization

A core component of the Islamic Republic's repressive strategy during the WLF Movement was the framing of dissent as illegitimate and foreign-orchestrated. This form of repression operated not through force alone but through narrative control, shaping public perception and justifying the crackdown. As *Barjasteh & Jafarnejad* (2025) explain, authoritarian regimes,

such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, use discourse to justify the repression of protest movements. Initially, Iranian authorities acknowledged the public's right to protest but gradually undermined this right by strategically recontextualizing the events as „riots” or threats to national security. They borrowed from international legal discourse and policing practices to draw false equivalences, using references to terrorism, separatism, anti-colonialism and national sovereignty to frame dissent as illegitimate and dangerous. This framing allowed them to construct what the author calls „counter-frames“, which delegitimize protesters and portray state repression as a necessary defense of public order. The study's wider implication is the identification of a new model of repression: „the neo-authoritarian policing repertoire of knowledge practices”(cf. Barjasteh & Jafarnejad 2025: 13-16).

This narrative can be exemplified with the events on October 28th 2022, when two principal security institutions of the state, the Ministry of Intelligence and the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC, issued a joint statement concerning the ongoing protests. The document framed the unrest not as a domestic response to systemic grievances, but as part of a foreign-orchestrated conspiracy. The protests were characterized as the result of „foreign intelligence services” exploiting public dissatisfaction under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights. The protests were attributed to Western intelligence agencies, particularly those of the United States, United Kingdom and Israel. The statement called initiatives like Starlink as „American Internet dictatorship” and accused social media platforms such as Meta of enabling disinformation and violence. Iranian journalists Nilufar Hamed and Elahe Mohammadi were publicly labeled as foreign agents for reporting on the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 38f.). This rhetoric strategy was reinforced by high-ranking officials, including the Supreme Leader Khamenei, the President, military commanders and judiciary heads, who consistently referred to protesters as „rioters”, „thugs” or „agents of the enemy”. The judiciary created special branches for prosecuting protesters and forced confessions, coerced statements from victims' families and accusations against celebrities and academics were disseminated via state media. Simultaneously, internet restrictions, arrests of foreign nationals and censorship of dissenting voices were justified as necessary security measures (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 474–481).

4.4.2 Digital Repression and Surveillance

These actions, which had an impact on communication and economic activity, included daily internet shutdowns, lowered home internet speeds and the nationwide blocking of social media platforms. Over nine million Iranians using Instagram for business were affected and satellite TV signals were also jammed, targeting Persian-language media abroad. The shutdowns were a fundamental component of the state's digital repression strategy, which sought to conceal documentation of violence and isolate the protest movement (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 51f.).

According to *NetBlocks* (2022), a nearly complete internet shutdown began on the evening of September 19th, 2022, in Iran's Kurdistan province, particularly around Sanandaj, coinciding with the outbreak of protests following Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death. A nationwide mobile network shutdown followed on 21 September, with only unstable access returning by early December. The internet shutdowns were intended to hinder the public's capacity to share political dissent and engage in open communication (cf. Netblocks 2022). The *UN II FFM* (2024) found that Iranian authorities systematically used digital tools to repress the WLF Movement. From the outset of the demonstrations in September 2022, internet access was disrupted across the country, particularly in minority-populated regions such as Sistan and Balochestan. During high-tension moments, such as the „Bloody Friday” in Zahedan, internet connectivity was almost entirely cut off. These targeted shutdowns continued throughout 2023, especially during weekly Friday prayers in Zahedan (UN II FFM 2024: 16).

In parallel, the state employed surveillance to monitor online activity and used social media content as grounds for arrests and criminal prosecutions. Individuals were charged with offences such as „propaganda against the system”, „spreading lies” and „insulting the Supreme Leader” for posting messages of solidarity with the movement, reports of human rights abuses or photos of injured protesters. In some cases, the content of personal Instagram accounts was used as evidence in court proceedings, including in cases resulting in the death penalty. The *UN II FFM* (2024) also documented that authorities tolerated or were directly involved in online smear campaigns, doxing and other forms of online harassment, particularly targeting women and LGBTQI+ individuals (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 16). This was part of a deliberate state strategy to break up digital solidarity and weaken the protest movement from within, as *Dzhambazova* (2023: 153) points out. Social networks were essential for organizing and

expressing protests, but because of their ambiguity, they were also vulnerable to manipulation. Misinformation, fake profiles and coordinated bot activity, which are frequently linked to pro-government actors looking to undermine public confidence and shatter digital solidarity, presented protesters with serious difficulties.

Parallel to connectivity restrictions, Iranian authorities deployed a broad range of surveillance technologies to monitor and control the protest movement. The *UN II FFM* (2024) documented the use of drones, CCTV networks and data extracted from phones and social media platforms to identify participants. In some cases, women were arrested based on footage of them removing their hijab and students were expelled or penalized after being recognized in protest videos. Surveillance even extended into hospitals, where security agents monitored incoming patients to identify and arrest injured protesters (cf. *UN II FFM* 2024: 6f.).

4.4.3 Militarized Policing and Lethal Force

The Iranian government used a broad spectrum of security forces and weapons to crush nonviolent protest during the WLF Movement. Rifles, shotguns and handguns were among the weapons used by security personnel against unarmed demonstrators and bystanders, which led to thousands of injuries and hundreds of fatalities. Human rights organizations' reports detail how different security force units, including Basij battalions, IRGC-controlled units and FARAJA (national police), used both more lethal weapons and traditional riot-control tools like tear gas, stun grenades and batons. (cf. Amnesty International 2023: 110; Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 43–47, 55f.). Notably, paintball guns were reportedly aimed at protesters' faces and eyes, causing permanent injuries, while shotguns were used systematically in larger cities and military-grade assault rifles were employed in ethnic and religious minority regions, like Sistan and Balochistan and Kurdistan. At least 104 people were killed in a single day on September 30, 2022, during the Bloody Friday massacre in Zahedan. In Sanandaj, Kurdistan, there was comparable violence. Protesters from ethnic minority groups were disproportionately targeted and women who disobeyed dress codes faced threats, insults and gunfire. The mission came to the conclusion that the state's response was intended to intimidate, punish and control through physical and psychological harm in addition to suppressing dissent (cf. *UN II FFM* 2024: 4-6). As a result, excessive force was used for purposes other than crowd control. Ammunition was frequently fired at protesters at close

range, targeting vulnerable parts like the face, neck and eyes. Hundreds of cases of partial or complete blindness were recorded by the UN Fact-Finding Mission, which noted that these injuries had a symbolic purpose of physically identifying people as dissidents and inciting fear (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 5).

The streets were not the only places where this pattern of militarized repression occurred. A particular incident happened at Tehran's Evin Prison on October 15, 2022. Evin Prison is a central facility for political detainees and those accused of national security crimes. An unrest reportedly began after prisoners in multiple wards expressed solidarity with the ongoing nationwide protests. Clashes with prison guards ensued, followed by a visible fire, the use of tear gas and stun grenades and reports of live ammunition being deployed within the facility. Several prisoners were injured, many were transferred to other locations under unclear circumstances. Footage circulated on social media showed fire, explosions and gunfire, prompting public concern and gatherings outside the prison. In response, state authorities issued multiple and at times contradictory, explanations for the events, attributing the unrest to an altercation among inmates convicted of common crimes. Reports from independent sources, however, documented the targeting of political prisoners and indicated that several wards, including the women's ward, were affected (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 33-35).

4.4.4 Detention Practices and Institutionalized Abuse

Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions

The *UN II FFM* (2024) documented a widespread pattern of arbitrary arrests and detentions during and after the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Protesters were routinely arrested for protected activities such as chanting slogans, dancing or honking car horns. These detentions extended beyond active protesters to include journalists, teachers, artists, medical personnel, athletes, family members of victims and others expressing solidarity. Journalists and human rights defenders investigating state violence were similarly detained. Estimates of those arrested vary, with the government claiming to have pardoned 22,000 individuals, while human rights organizations suggest that up to 60,000 may have been detained. The average age of arrestees was reportedly as low as 15 years. Arrests occurred during home raids, in schools, workplaces and even at funeral ceremonies. Some were arrested at home based on surveillance

evidence, while others were summoned to serve previously suspended sentences in order to pre-empt their participation in demonstrations (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 6f.).

Systemic Torture during Detention

During the WLF Movement, Iranian authorities routinely employed torture as a form of repression. Torture was purposefully used, frequently with discriminatory or dehumanizing intent, to coerce confessions, intimidate detainees, punish protest participation and enforce compliance. Torture started at the moment of arrest and persisted throughout incarceration in both official and informal facilities run by the Ministry of Intelligence, the IRGC, the police and the Prisons Organization. In addition to various forms of physical and psychological abuse, detainees—including children—were repeatedly questioned while wearing blindfolds. Beatings, electric shocks, stress positions, mock executions and forced drug injections were common techniques. Detainees were often denied access to healthcare, kept in isolation for extended periods of time and questioned while wearing blindfolds. Threats of rape or injury to family members were common forms of psychological torture. Children were also subjected to these abuses and many of them were denied family or legal contact (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 7). The mission concluded that such acts could amount to crimes against humanity, given their systematic and targeted nature, specially against individuals advocating for human rights and gender equality (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 1-3). The most extreme forms of abuse, including sexual violence, were reported from unofficial detention sites run by the IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence. The mission also documented deaths in custody resulting from torture. Many survivors withheld their testimony due to fear of reprisals and some only accessed medical or psychological care after fleeing the country (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 7).

Sexual Violence

Similarly, *Amnesty International* (2023) reported that Iranian intelligence and security forces frequently used sexual violence, arbitrary detention and torture both during and after the 2022 protests. Survivors were frequently kidnapped by uniformed or plainclothes agents from homes, workplaces, or streets and taken to official or unofficial detention facilities without following the proper arrest protocols. Rape and other forms of sexual violence were perpetrated throughout the entire process, including in detention facilities, transport vehicles and during arrests. Hours of torture intended to cause a great deal of psychological trauma and humiliation were inflicted on the detainees. Many were coerced into signing false confessions under duress, often involving fabricated claims of foreign affiliation or financial support for protest activity.

These abuses occurred not only in recognized detention centres run by the state authorities, but also in unofficial sites such as private residences („safe houses”), warehouses, parking lots and even schools (cf. Amnesty International 2023: 12).

Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

The UN II FFM (2024) and Amnesty International (2023) further highlighted a systematic pattern of sexual and gender-based violence used by authorities. Women and girls were held in male-dominated facilities without safeguards, significantly increasing their vulnerability to sexual violence (cf. Amnesty International 2023: 12). Women were specifically targeted for their leadership roles in the protests or for public defiance of compulsory hijab laws. Besides, victims included LGBTQI+ individuals. Abuses involved rape, genital electrocution, forced nudity, groping and degrading verbal abuse. By taking advantage of social and legal stigma, these acts were deliberately committed to punish, intimidate and silence individuals. LGBTQI+ people were particularly at risk and many of them chose not to report out of concern for harassment or criminalization. The mission concluded that the true scale of the violence is likely underreported and that such violence carries long-term psychological and physical consequences (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 6-8).

4.4.5 Judicial Repression

Iran’s judiciary was a key component of the state’s repressive apparatus after the protests began. Iran’s judiciary began mass prosecutions of demonstrators in October 2022, announcing over 1,000 indictments in various provinces. (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 39f.). Trials commenced in Tehran under Judge Abolqasem Salavati, who is infamous for his role in political cases, with charges such as *Moharebeh* („waging war against God”) and *Efsade fel-arz* („spreading corruption on earth”) (cf. Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte n.d.). By early December, at least 12 individuals had received death sentences, others were handed lengthy prison terms (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 39f.).

Due process issues were brought up by these trials due to reports of restricted legal access and dubious evidence. They were denounced by human rights organizations as politically motivated „show trials“ intended to scare the public and support state narratives (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 39f.). The methodical application of legal procedures to crush

dissent was validated by the UN II FFM. Protesters were prosecuted in criminal and revolutionary courts under vaguely defined charges like „spreading propaganda against the system“, „insulting the sanctities of Islam“ and „disrupting public order.“ Many of these charges were based on coerced confessions and judges frequently ignored credible allegations of torture and other due process violations (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 8-10). The judicial repression extended to defense attorneys: Lawyers who represented arrested protesters or publicly expressed solidarity with the movement were themselves subjected to state harassment. The *UN II FFM* (2024) reported instances of interrogation, suspension from the bar, arrest, detention, torture and prosecution targeting legal professionals (cf. 2024: 13). This repertoire of repression reached its most extreme form in the widespread application of the death penalty. Between December 2022 and November 2023, at least eight individuals were officially executed for protest-related charges. These executions' timing and publicity strongly imply that they were carried out as political tools to suppress further dissent (cf. Amnesty International, 2023: 110).

4.4.6 Targeting Educational Spaces

During the WLF Movement, educational institutions were one of the key targets in the Iranian state's toolkit of repression, as was discussed in 4.4.4. The state turned schools and colleges into areas of increased surveillance, intimidation and control in response to students, especially young girls, becoming vocal protestors. Security personnel allegedly entered school buildings in several cities, detained pupils and intimidated them physically and psychologically. Numerous minors were taken into custody and, in certain situations, placed in juvenile detention facilities. Alarming events like the death of Ardabil high school student Asra Panahi were the result of this campaign of repression. Independent sources and public outcry strongly suggested state involvement, despite officials denying any connection to protest activity (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 36-38). More clandestine methods were used in the repression. A wave of poisonings targeting schoolgirls started in Qom in late November 2022 and over the next few months, it spread to many provinces. Symptoms like nausea, lightheadedness and breathing problems were reported by thousands of girls. Early in 2023, the poisonings increased and they persisted until at least November of that year. The UN II FFM (2024) looked into these unusual occurrences and noted how close they were to the WLF Movement, in which schoolgirls were actively and visibly involved. The mission concluded that it was probable that the poisonings were meant to incite fear, punish female students and

silence dissent, especially with regard to disobedience of mandatory hijab laws, even though the nature of the substances is still unknown. The mission concluded that some degree of state involvement was likely due to the state's lack of transparency, the scope of the events and their gendered targeting (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 14).

According to the UN II FFM (2024), Iranian authorities systematically repressed students and teachers at the university level both during and after the protests. Over 435 university students had been suspended or expelled by April 2023 due to their involvement in protests and thousands more had been called before disciplinary committees. Many left their institutions voluntarily due to fear of retaliation. Teachers and trade union leaders faced criminal charges under national security laws for their involvement in demonstrations. The mission also revealed various punitive actions against educators, such as forced retirements, salary reductions, arbitrary terminations and disciplinary actions, especially for those who supported student activism or disobeyed mandatory hijab (cf. UN II FFM 2024: 13). The Student Basij, a paramilitary organization based at universities and connected to the IRGC, strengthened repression in educational institutions. During the WLF protests, members engaged in physical confrontations with demonstrators, conducted surveillance and submitted information to security forces, resulting in arrests (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 47f.). A significant incident unfolded at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran on October 2nd, 2022. What began as peaceful demonstrations with class boycotts and public declarations by students and faculty, escalated when security forces, including plainclothes officers and members of the Basij militia, stormed the campus. They opened fire on students and detained dozens (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran, 2022: 27-29).

4.4.7 Repression of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

While protests occurred across all provinces during the WLF Movement, the regions of Kurdistan and Baluchistan experienced some of the most severe repression. The *UN II FFM* (2024) states that ethnic and religious minorities faced disproportionate levels of state violence during the WLF Movement. From the start of the movement, authorities framed it as a separatist threat to national unity and explicitly targeted ethnic minority protesters with rhetoric portraying them as „terrorists” or „violent”. Security forces employed especially lethal tactics in minority regions. (cf. 2024: 15f.). In the Sistan and Balochestan province, military-grade

weapons were used against civilians. One of the deadliest incidents, referred to as „Bloody Friday”, occurred in Zahedan on 30 September 2022. There, protests erupted following the alleged rape of a Baluchi girl by a police officer. During Friday prayers, security forces fired on the crowd using heavy machinery, killing 103 people and injuring at least 350. The mission concluded that the government’s response in minority areas was especially violent and showed clear discrimination based on ethnicity and religion

Kurdish-majority cities similarly emerged as centres of mass protest and lethal crackdowns. Kurdish opposition groups in northern Iraq were also targeted in cross-border attacks, underscoring the militarized approach to Kurdish dissent. Both populations, largely Sunni, ethnically non-Persian and socioeconomically marginalized, have historically faced structural discrimination, making them especially vulnerable to state violence and contributing to the heightened mobilization and repression (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 40f.).

4.4.8 Forced Displacement and Cross-Border Repression

As part of its repertoire of repression, the Islamic Republic of Iran has used internal and external displacement as a tool for punishment to fragment protest networks and silence protesters. For example, the Iranian judiciary sentenced numerous protestors to internal exile, meaning a forced residence in remote, economically disadvantaged regions. These sentences, often last up to 21 years and include bans on communication, movement and participation in gatherings, enforced under surveillance by security forces. Such internal exile constitutes arbitrary displacement and is used as a punitive response to dissent. Thus, many protestors were compelled to flee Iran altogether. Protesters, journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders fled the country to avoid imminent threats of arrest, sexual violence or execution. The decision to leave was rarely voluntary, interviewed protestors described the act of fleeing as a last resort for survival (cf. UN II FFM 2025: 15f.).

However, the repression of the Iranian state extends beyond its borders, targeting activists, journalists and human rights defenders living abroad. These individuals, many of whom fled persecution after the 2022 protests, faced threats, intimidation and harassment both online and offline. Iranian officials used these tactics to suppress information about the protests and punish dissenters, often resulting in retaliation against their families inside Iran, including detention, interrogation and loss of employment. Journalists working for Persian-language outlets

designated by the Iranian government as „terrorist organizations”, such as BBC Persian and Iran International, faced increased threats. These included direct threats from IRGC officials and at least 15 documented cases of attempted murder or abduction in the UK, Europe, US and neighboring countries of Iran. Some incidents led to heightened security measures and even the temporary closure of media offices. These tactics included online harassment and smear campaigns, often coordinated by state-affiliated individuals or institutions. Victims reported cutting all ties with relatives in Iran to avoid endangering them further. These measures created a climate of isolation and fear that went beyond Iran’s physical borders, thus internationalizing Iran’s authoritarian power (cf. UN II FFM 2025: 16).

4.5 Adaptive Repertoires of Resistance

This chapter examines how the WLF Movement adapted its repertoires of resistance in response to escalating state repression, as described in existing literature, reports and journalistic sources. While the chapters 4.3 and 4.4 outlined the initial forms of protest and repression, this section focuses on how protesters modified their strategies to maintain the movement in the face of increasingly restrictive circumstances. The examples presented here are based on secondary sources and document how resistance shifted in form and space.

4.5.1 Digital and Technological Adaptation

As outlined in chapter 4.4.2 a repertoire of repression of the Iranian state was to suppress digital activism through widespread internet shutdowns, censorship and surveillance. However, using these measures to suppress the movement proved increasingly ineffective. Protesters adapted by employing VPNs, encrypted messaging apps and decentralized social networks. As *Dzhambazova* (2023: 148) argues, the failure of state blackouts to contain the flow of protest content marked a turning point in the digital contest between authoritarian control and citizen resistance. This inefficacy not only enabled the continued circulation of protest content but also exposed the limits of traditional authoritarian tactics in the face of a technologically savvy people. Compared to 2019, the 2022 shutdowns failed to block the spread of protest content, in large part due to the population’s technological adaptability (cf. *Dzhambazova* 2023: 148; 154).

By using social media to document protests, expose police violence and highlight human rights violations, the movement was able to reach a global audience and generate widespread public

outrage. *Hamidi* (2023) also points to the strategic use of artistic expression to articulate the movement's demands and reach wider audiences. In addition, social media provided a platform for forming coalitions and expressing solidarity. Public figures inside Iran, such as actresses, athletes and musicians visibly supported the movement by removing their hijabs, posting on Instagram and performing protest art. As physical protest spaces were increasingly targeted by state violence, digital platforms emerged as essential nodes for real-time updates, expressions of solidarity and the development of a collective identity. These online networks enabled the movement to remain active and adaptable, even under heightened repression. (cf. *Hamidi* 2023: 6-8).

Digital activism also extended the reach of the movement beyond Iran (for more see chapter 4.4.6). Members of feminist and activist networks in exile contributed to the global amplification of the WLF Movement by sharing content organizing protests abroad and maintaining transnational ties. (cf. *Moqadam* 2025: 17). One notable form of international digital solidarity was the use of Snowflake, a browser-based extension that helps circumvent state censorship by creating anonymous access points to the Tor network. By installing Snowflake, users around the world were able to help Iranians access uncensored information and communication tools. Following the September 2022 blackouts, the usage of Snowflake surged, quadrupling in just a few days. By the end of the year, global usage had increased from 5,000 to 75,000 users, with Iran comprising a significant share (cf. *Constanze* 2022).

Another innovative form of digital resistance during the WLF Movement was the practice of sousveillance, a form of monitoring and exposure of individual perpetrators of repression by the crowd. Protesters and observers recorded and disseminated images and videos of security forces involved in violent crackdowns. These materials were shared digitally. Platforms such as „Spreading Justice” supported the identification and documentation of individuals, contributing to international sanctions against over 100 people and entities. Consequently, security personnel increasingly obscured their identities and images of masked officers became more common (cf. *Human Rights Activists in Iran* 2022: 42f.).

4.5.2 Spatial Adaptation

In response to the violent crackdowns and intensified street surveillance during the initial weeks of the uprising, protesters increasingly shifted their activities into alternative spatial

spheres. As the risk of arrest and physical harm in public spaces grew, many resorted to safer, low-visibility tactics. According to *Khatam* (cf. 2023: 303), organizers started moving protests to local areas and neighbourhood intersections as a result of more security personnel on main roads, especially in central Tehran. This decentralization made it possible for young women to participate more actively and increased the adaptability of protests in their local communities. However, this structure also made large-scale protests less visible and made it more difficult to measure participation using conventional techniques, like those used during the Green Movement (cf. *Khatam* 2023: 303). As *Khodaei* (cf. 2023: 9) notes, this shift in the organization of protest sites reduced the risk of repression and allowed for wider participation.

Furthermore, everyday objects and private environments were transformed into tools of resistance. In residential areas, demonstrators banged pots and pans from balconies, while rooftop chants of slogans like „Death to the dictator” became widespread, offering a lower-risk yet collective form of dissent. In addition to helping demonstrators avoid being recognized by security personnel, this tactic promoted forms of community solidarity and coordination that were challenging to put down. Protesters used two-part chants, with one group starting and another responding from nearby buildings, according to video evidence (cf. *Khatam* 2023: 303; *Human Rights Activists in Iran* 2022: 29f.). Despite decreasing physical protests, these nightly chants continued, reviving methods from past movements like the 1979 revolution (cf. *Khodaei* 2023: 9). These acts were frequently led by women, who would start chants or record and share videos on social media (cf. *Human Rights Activists in Iran* 2022: 29f.). Sanitary pads, which were later incorporated into protest art, were one of the inventive ways that protesters repurposed household items to stop surveillance (cf. *Moqadam* 2025: 16).

Iranian security forces implemented new surveillance and repression techniques targeted specifically at the private sphere as these forms of domestic resistance gained prominence. Drones were used by authorities to locate protest hotspots, green floodlights were used to illuminate residential buildings and visible signs, like coloured crosses, were used to identify homes suspected of participating. These symbolic markings served as tools for public intimidation in addition to facilitating surveillance. Furthermore, it has been reported that security personnel use loudspeakers to directly threaten residents, sometimes even threatening to execute them. Security forces intensified these tactics on October 28, 2022, when they threw stun grenades and tear gas at windows and residential buildings in Tehran’s Chitgar district. In one instance, a house in the Nazi Abad neighbourhood caught fire after a tear gas canister was

thrown inside. Repression worsened the next night in Tehran's Ekbatan housing complex. According to reports, security personnel seriously damaged common areas, broke windows and doors and vandalized elevators. Bloodstained floors and damaged infrastructure were depicted in video evidence that went viral online (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 29f.).

4.5.3 Mourning Rituals

Following the deaths of protesters during the WLF Movement, families and supporters frequently turned to religious mourning practices, especially the Shia tradition of holding ceremonies on the fortieth day after death (*chehlom*), as opportunities for public protest. These gatherings served as both acts of remembrance and forms of resistance as they allowed communities to publicly mourn slain protesters while also expressing opposition to the state. Their cultural and religious significance offered a degree of protection, often enabling large turnouts despite the risk of repression (cf. Khodaei 2023: 9). This was evident in the large gatherings on 26 October 2022, forty days after the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, in her hometown of Saqqez. Despite threats from security forces and roadblocks, mourners reached the cemetery on foot and by vehicle. Protests were also reported in Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, various Kurdish cities, including gatherings at universities (cf. The Guardian 2022).

4.5.4 Confrontational Tactics

Although nonviolent resistance was the movement's primary focus, unarmed and impulsive acts of physical and verbal aggression were occasionally used. In general, these acts—which included using offensive or confrontational slogans—were considered defensive measures meant to neutralize immediate threats rather than calculated acts of violence (cf. Khodaei 2023: 10). Turban knocking, or taking off Shia clerics' turbans in public, was a more combative act that surfaced during protests. Clerics involved in enforcing dress codes, such as the mandatory hijab, were the target of this act, which took place during public protests. *Batyari* (cf. 2025:11) claims that by focusing on clerics' own symbolic attire, the strategy was meant to respond to clerical involvement in regulating women's attire.

At the same time, the movement experienced a notable shift in protest dynamics, with an increase in the use of violent tactics by some participants. This surge in protest-related violence

unfolded in response to intense state repression and was characterized by a noticeable shift toward confrontational tactics. According to the data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the period from mid-September to December 2022 witnessed the highest number of violent demonstration events in Iran since systematic monitoring began in 2016. Over 400 incidents classified as violent demonstrations were documented across at least 23 provinces. Protestors used tactics like the use of Molotov cocktails with nearly 70 incidents being reported. They targeted Basij and IRGC facilities, religious seminaries and the private residences of regime-affiliated individuals. Simultaneously, online resistance intensified, with video tutorials on constructing incendiary devices circulating on social media and reports of protesters sharing addresses of security personnel via darknet platforms. Between mid-September and December 2022, at least 46 members of Iran's security apparatus, including Basij, IRGC and police personnel, were killed during clashes with protesters. While some deaths resulted from beatings or attacks with cold weapons, others were caused by firearms. The trend of the use of armed resistance extended into early 2023, including the targeted killing of an IRGC member involved in crackdowns in Mahabad and a security operative allegedly linked to the arrest and execution of a protester in Tehran. Kurdish regions recorded the highest number of firearm-related incidents. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether these actions were coordinated by organized armed groups (cf. Sammy 2023).

4.5.5 Acts of Solidarity and Collective Protection

Another adaptive repertoire of the movement reviewed in existing literature has been its solidarity among citizens, particularly in public acts of defiance against the morality police. Since their renewed and more aggressive presence in early 2022, people increasingly intervened to support women being harassed or arrested, often creating public disruptions to resist these arrests. In contrast to the more dispersed demonstrations of 2017 and 2019, the WLF Movement benefited from a common opposition to the morality police, particularly among women and young people who had already formed bonds through regular interactions with law enforcement (Khatam 2023: 301). Solidarity extended beyond the streets into broader civil society. Independent labor and teachers' unions, such as the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations and several regional teachers' unions, issued public statements condemning Mahsa Amini's death and calling for justice. Major labor organizations such as the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Workers' Syndicate also expressed solidarity, with oil contract workers warning the

government against continued repression (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 458pp.; Slingers Collective 2023).

4.5.6 Transnational Solidarity and International Pressure

Furthermore, the WLF Movement generated transnational solidarity through both digital and physical channels. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok were used to share information about Jina (Mahsa) Amini's case and to organize solidarity actions. Hashtags like #JusticeForMahsa and #MahsaAmini gained significant international traction and were able to amplify the movement's message beyond Iran's borders (cf. Elmore 2024: 3).

Additionally, there were physical protests outside Iranian embassies and consulates around the world, with the help of diaspora communities who were instrumental in planning rallies, organizing fundraising campaigns and sharing protest videos from within Iran. Celebrities, public figures and certain politicians endorsed the movement. Collaborations with groups like Amnesty International, which included coordinated solidarity campaigns, petition drives and open letters to Iranian officials, complemented these initiatives. (cf. Elmore 2024: 3f.). Iranian rock climber Elnaz Rekabi, who participated in the Asian Rock-Climbing Championship in South Korea in October 2022 without wearing a hijab, is one prominent example. For the first time, an athlete from Iran's national team was publicly unveiled, garnering widespread support from Iranians around the world. Rekabi later issued a social media statement claiming it was a „wardrobe malfunction“ raising suspicions about state pressure (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 35f.).

The international response also included institutional actions. Institutions such as the European Union, the United Nations and various national foreign ministries issued statements in support of protesters and demanded an end to state violence. Multiple countries, including Canada, the United States of America and members of the EU, imposed sanctions on Iranian officials and entities linked to the repression, including the Morality Police, IRGC commanders and cyber defence units (cf. 2022: Human Rights Activists in Iran 463-468). On 16 January 2023, thousands of protesters gathered in front of the European Parliament in Strasbourg to express solidarity with the movement and to criticize what they perceived as the European Union's inadequate response to state violence in Iran. The demonstrators demanded concrete actions,

including the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization and the expulsion of Iranian diplomats. Although the EU had imposed sanctions on Iranian officials, protesters viewed these measures as insufficient and symbolic. Their slogans and banners called out the EU's hesitation and demanded that European institutions move beyond rhetorical support (cf. Die Zeit 2023).

4.5.7 Adaptive Student Resistance in the Case of Sharif University

The events at Sharif University of Technology on October 2nd 2022 (see chapter 4.4.6) exemplify how student protest repertoires were rapidly transformed in response to direct state violence. Initially characterized by class boycotts, public statements and peaceful demonstrations, student activism on campus rapidly evolved following a violent raid by security forces. That evening, plainclothes officers and Basij militia stormed the university, fired on students and detained dozens. The assault drew widespread condemnation both within Iran and internationally. Crowds gathered near the campus in support, only to be dispersed with tear gas. Despite repression, protesters adapted their tactics and shifted toward lower-risk, symbolic acts of resistance. One notable shift was the challenge to gender segregation in university dining halls. When prevented from entering the cafeteria together, students staged mixed-gender sit-ins in open courtyards, laying out tablecloths and eating communally (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran, 2022: 27pp.).

4.5.8 Labor Strikes and Economic Disruption

As of October 2022, Strikes emerged as a repertoire of resistance in the WLF Movement, mobilizing workers across diverse sectors. The „Women and Youth Committee of Sanandaj Neighborhoods” released a statement calling for a nationwide strike. Framing their struggle as part of a broader revolutionary movement, the committee emphasized the need for coordinated resistance in neighbourhoods, universities and labor sectors (cf. via Slingers Collective 2022). Within the first 82 days of the movement, strikes and shop closures were recorded in 53 cities, including 163 market shutdowns and 110 work stoppages in institutions and workplaces. Participation extended to traditionally regime-aligned spaces such as the Tehran Bazaar, as well as oil, petrochemical and industrial sectors in cities like Asaluyeh, Abadan, Isfahan and Tehran. Teachers, lawyers and truck drivers also joined, with some individuals resigning in solidarity. The state attempted to prevent or suppress labour mobilization by arresting over 250

workers, making overdue payments to pensioners and drivers and raiding professional gatherings, such as those held by protesting lawyers. (cf. Human Rights Activists in Iran 2022: 49). Nevertheless, a three-day general strike in December 2022 marked a peak in labor mobilization. This action united a wide range of society and spread across several provinces, in contrast to previous strikes that were frequently industry-specific or geographically limited. (cf. Khodaei 2023: 9).

5 Research Process and Methodology

This study's methodology combines empirical research with a literature-based analysis. Semi-structured interviews with four members of the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) Movement form the empirical component. Prior to these interviews, I conducted a field exploration that included an expert interview with a human rights advocate engaged in the movement. While the number of interview participants is limited, the interviews serve as an in-depth and complementary addition to the literature analysis. The decision was made because the subject matter was politically sensitive and researching repression in an authoritarian country like Iran, where access to protest participants was limited, posed security risks.

This chapter begins by outlining the research method of semi-structured interviews, following this, this chapter will offer a detailed description of the empirical research process, including access to the field, sampling strategy, participant recruitment, the interview procedure and data analysis. Conducting research within the context of authoritarian repression presented specific challenges, particularly limited access to protest participants and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the researcher's positionality as someone based in the Global North, including the strategies employed to navigate issues of trust, safety and representation.

5.1 Data Collection

5.1.1 Conducting the Interviews

The Semi-Structured Guided Interview

The main goal in the social sciences is to identify answers to research questions by employing techniques that are most appropriate for the topic and setting of study. This may involve qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches, depending on the particular research focus (cf. Baur & Blasius 2014: 42). When examining intricate social phenomena that result from lived experiences and practices and require careful interpretation and contextual knowledge, qualitative research is especially well-suited (cf. Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2014: 119). Given its goal of analysing the adaptive repertoires of contention involved in the WLF Movement, this study is based on qualitative social research. The empirical research complements a broader literature-based analysis that examines existing academic, journalistic and activist accounts of the WLF Movement. The interviews can provide depth and individual perspectives that reveal how collective processes are experienced on a personal level. Given the limited number of participants, the interviews are not meant to represent the movement as a whole but to provide insight into how repression and resistance are perceived and negotiated by those directly involved.

Before conducting the guided interviews with protestors, an expert interview was conducted with Shoura Hashemi, chief of Amnesty International Austria, who has, as a part of the Iranian Diaspora, been actively engaged in the WLF Movement. This perspective provided background information and helped identify key themes related to this study. After that, the primary data collection method was the semi-structured guided interview. This approach utilizes a pre-developed interview guide to balance openness and structure. According to *Helfferrich* (cf. 2014: 560), the guiding principle in creating such a guide is „as open as possible, as structured as necessary”. This allows for flexibility during the interview while ensuring that key topics are addressed. Thus, to prepare for the expert interview, I developed a structured guide. The questions focused less on the participant’s personal background and more on their specific professional expertise. The guide was divided into four sections. The interview began with questions about the expert’s background and involvement, situating her perspective within both personal and professional contexts. This was followed by a block on motivations and movement characteristics, which explored the driving forces behind the protests, the demands voiced by activists and how this wave of resistance compared to previous protest movements in Iran. The third block addressed the forms of protest and resistance observed, with attention to their evolution over time. I then focused on digital strategies and communication, asking how activists used social media, dealt with censorship and surveillance and developed new tools for mobilization. The next block concentrated on the state’s response and asked how

repression was enacted, how it changed over time and how the protest movement adapted in return. Another important dimension was the international aspect, where the guide addressed the role of the diaspora, the relevance of international solidarity and the dissonance between global media narratives and the reality within Iran. The final section offered space for reflection on the current situation and future outlook.

Similar themes served as the basis for the participant interview guides, which were modified to highlight individual experiences. In the first part of each interview, interviewees discussed their personal history and how and why they joined the movement. The second block examined how each person understood resistance, including what the term meant to them, whether their actions were motivated by individual or group solidarity and what objectives they connected to their protest. The third section concentrated on the spaces and forms of resistance that participants had either used or witnessed, while fourth section addressed repression and its effects. Participants were questioned about their experiences with state repression and whether or not these pressures affected their communication or protest tactics. The last theme block focused on social reactions and personal motivation, including what inspired them to carry on despite the dangers, how their families and communities reacted and whether or not prior protests had affected their political beliefs or tactics. An open-ended question at the end of each interview allowed participants to discuss issues they thought had been missed or to consider the protests' significance in hindsight.

During the participant interviews, I allowed myself a little flexibility even though the guides offered a common framework for comparison. I occasionally skipped questions that didn't seem appropriate or necessary, depending on the interviewee's personal context and the flow of the conversation. Similarly, I included spontaneous follow-up questions when specific subjects came up organically or when further explanation was required. This openness was crucial for establishing a trustworthy environment and capturing the uniqueness and complexity of each person's experience.

Interview Process

A total of five interviews were conducted for this research. Four of them took place online via Zoom, while one was conducted in person in a café in Vienna. Two of the participants were based outside of Vienna, which made in-person meetings impractical and further emphasized the need for a digital interview format. Due to limited access to institutional resources, I was

unable to use the university's licensed Zoom account and had to rely on the free version. This limitation proved challenging, as the free version automatically ends meetings after 40 minutes. As a result, interviews had to be interrupted, paused for approximately ten minutes and then resumed in a new session. Initially, I was concerned that this would disrupt the conversational flow and affect the participants' willingness to share openly. However, in practice, the interruptions were manageable and did not significantly hinder the depth or continuity of the conversations.

The interviews were conducted in 2020⁵, primarily in Farsi, as this allowed participants to express themselves more freely and naturally. Only the expert interview was conducted in German, due to the interviewee's professional background and language preference. This multilingual approach contributed to the richness of the data but also introduced an additional step in the processing of the material. After each interview, I used an AI-based transcription tool (TurboScribe) to generate transcripts of the recordings. The Farsi interviews were subsequently translated into English with the assistance of an AI-supported translation tool (ChatGPT: Translate GPT). I aimed to maintain the original meaning and nuance of the participants' statements and throughout this process, care was taken to preserve the participants' voices as authentically as possible. Any clarifications or corrections to the automated translations were made based on my own language competence and contextual understanding. While these technological tools facilitated the workflow and made the material accessible for coding and interpretation, their use was always guided by critical review and manual adjustments where needed.

5.1.2 Sampling and Access to the Field

The sampling strategy for this study was guided by both ethical considerations and practical constraints associated with researching protest movements under authoritarian regimes and followed the logic of purposive sampling logic, complemented by snowball sampling techniques (Flick 2018). Given the high risk of state surveillance and repression in Iran, interviews were conducted with individuals who are in exile. This decision was made to ensure the safety of participants. While opportunities for in-country interviews were considered, the risks for both participants and the researcher were deemed too high.

Potential interview partners were recruited through multiple channels. One way of recruitment involved reaching out via Instagram, where many activists share their political engagement. Particular attention was paid to those who openly stated that they had fled Iran or currently lived abroad. To ensure the diversity of the sample, outreach was extended to Kurdish and Baloch community organizations and activists. These contacts were asked to suggest potential participants, particularly from marginalized ethnic communities that had been disproportionately affected by state violence. The language of communication used during outreach was Farsi, written in Latin script (Finglish), as is common in digital communication among the Iranian diaspora. In addition to online outreach, access to participants was facilitated through my own personal position as a member of the Iranian diaspora. Through informal networks developed at community events, I was able to establish contact with individuals who had either participated in the protests themselves or were closely connected to those who had.

Ultimately, four individuals were interviewed for this study. Three of them are originally from Tehran and one participant is from the Kurdish region in Iran. The sample includes two men and two women, aged between 24 and 30. Two participants preferred to remain anonymous, while the other two maintain a public presence on social media and continue their activism online.

5.1.3 Interview Partners

Expert Interview: Shoura Zehetner-Hashemi, 42, currently works as the director of Amnesty International Austria. She was chosen as an expert interviewee not only due to her current professional role in human rights advocacy but also because of her close involvement with the WLF Movement from its early days. Although she had no prior history of political activism or formal connection to the Iranian diaspora, the events surrounding Jina (Mahsa) Amini's death and the consequent protests represented a significant shift for her. As she explained, her engagement began spontaneously through social media and quickly grew into an active political stance: „I got involved overnight, I would say. It was very spontaneous” (Expert Interview). In this sense, Shoura occupies a dual position: she is both a practitioner within a human rights organization and, in some ways, a participant in the movement's transnational dimension. Her insights encompass both an institutional perspective and the lived experience of someone who was mobilized by the protests.

Interview 1: Ava (Pseudonym), 30, grew up in Tehran and holds a background in interior architecture and visual arts. After completing her bachelor's degree in Iran, she gradually transitioned into more artistic work, including ceramics and design, before deciding to pursue a formal education in fine arts in Europe. After leaving Iran earlier in 2025, she is currently based in Austria, having previously studied in Germany. Ava was selected as a participant because of her direct engagement in the movement during her time in Tehran.

Interview 2: Keyvan, 26, comes from Oshnavieh, a Kurdish-majority city located in Iran's West Azerbaijan province, near the Turkish border. At the time of the movement, he was a 23-year-old medical student actively involved in the protests in his home region. Following the intensifying repression, he was forced to flee Iran and is now continuing his studies in exile. Keyvan's participation in this study was critical given his dual role as both a protest participant and an initiator of practical support networks during the movement. His testimony provides an ethnic minority perspective on protest participation and repression and on the transnational continuation of activism after exile.

Interview 3: Ghazal, 30 originally from Tehran, currently resides in Germany, where she has lived since she was forced to leave Iran three years ago. Trained in theatre, she identifies mainly as an artist, working across mediums including painting, writing, performance and photography. However, her political consciousness has been shaped not only by her artistic practice but also by her family background: both of her parents were long-time political activists in Iran. Her mother's imprisonment represented a significant shifting point in her own political engagement during the movement.

Interview 4: Siavash (Pseudonym), 24, is a former student of electrical engineering at Sharif University in Teheran, one of Iran's leading institutions for science and technology. He was still enrolled as a student during the WLF Movement. His observations provide insight into the role of students in the movement, especially at universities that developed into significant centres for both mobilization and repression.

5.2 Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun & Clarke (2022), an analysis method particularly suited for exploring subjective experiences and meaning-making within social movements. RTA focuses on the interpretative and situated nature of knowledge production. It recognizes the researcher not as a detached observer, but as an active, meaning-making participant who brings their positionality, theoretical lens and reflexive awareness into the analytical process. As Braun & Clarke (2022) emphasize, engaging meaningfully with RTA involves acknowledging a certain degree of uncertainty and accepting that meaning is not fixed but fluid, contextual and dependent on the interpretive labour.

Throughout the analysis, I worked as a „knowing practitioner”, being aware that theoretical and methodological decisions are not neutral, but shape what becomes visible in the data. Importantly, one does not need to have a fully fixed approach from the outset. RTA’s methodological flexibility while requiring transparency and coherence in how choices are made. With this foundation, the analysis in this study emerged not through mechanical coding, but through sustained engagement with the data, the literature and my own positionality.

RTA follows six key phases:

1. Familiarization with the data through reading and re-reading transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes manually by marking meaningful units of text
3. Searching for themes by clustering codes around shared narratives or logics.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness.
5. Defining, refining and naming themes in line with theoretical frameworks.
6. Producing the report, integrating data extracts and analytical commentary.

Through familiarization with the data set, I was able to identify various segments of potential analytic interest. Coding was done inductively in the codes and subthemes, but informed by key concepts from contentious politics literature, layed out in the theory chapters, in the overall themes. The coding was performed via MAXQDA, using a multi-stage process. Initial codes emerged directly from the interview material, in the second cycle of coding, these were grouped into so-called subthemes. These subthemes were again grouped into overarching thematic clusters in a third cycle of coding. Reflective texts were used to document emerging

interpretations or connections between participant narratives and the broader research questions. The memo-writing process helped clarify the conceptual significance of certain codes and guided later analytical decisions. Once the full dataset had been coded, a code cleaning process was undertaken. Redundant or overlapping codes were consolidated, ambiguous ones redefined and rarely used ones either revised or removed. This helped streamline the coding system and improved internal coherence across the data. Following this, theme summaries were written for each major code cluster. Finally, themes were refined, named and ordered in relation to both the empirical material and the theoretical framework.

5.3 Reflexion and Ethical Considerations

Conducting research on protest movements in authoritarian contexts poses substantial ethical considerations and methodological challenges. These challenges are shaped not only by the political environment in which such movements unfold but also by the positionality of the researcher. In my case, this not only includes being a researcher from the Global North, but also being an Iranian citizen, a journalist and a diaspora activist who has reported on and engaged with protest movements.

Rivetti's (2017) study on conducting field research in authoritarian settings, which emphasizes the significance of directly interacting with activists and using a bottom-up approach to ensure ethical integrity, is one important work that guides my ethical reflections. This approach is especially useful for researching protests in Iran, where involvement entails greater risks than in democracies. However, these dynamics are further reinforced by my own situation as someone who is unable to visit Iran because of safety concerns. In contrast to researchers from other countries, I could be criminalized or subjected to repression if I returned, which would prevent me from conducting direct fieldwork within the nation. Consequently, I interviewed people who are currently living in exile. Every participant was made aware of the interviews' voluntary nature, their right to remain anonymous and their ability to revoke their consent at any time. Because of the digital environment, informed consent was obtained verbally; for participants who were not anonymized, consent was provided in written form. Identifying information was either omitted or pseudonymized for the other two participants. However, ethical research in politically repressive settings requires ongoing negotiation and context-aware judgment; it cannot be reduced to one-time consent forms.

Kamel (cf. 2024: 26) critically examines the collaborations between foreign researchers and local Iranian activists, which have played an important role in feminist research, particularly on topics such as gender and social movements. These researchers, mainly from universities of the Global North, often rely on local feminists and protest participants for data, which they then use in publications and conference presentations. However, due to heightened security conditions, collaboration tends to be unidirectional, benefiting the global academic community while offering little reciprocal support to local participants. Although concerns about personal risk when supporting local activists are valid, such risks are shared and, according to her, do not justify maintaining unequal, one-way research relationships.

These concerns were particularly present given the context of the WLF Movement, which attracted international media attention and a high level of visibility. *Sydiq* (2024) analyses the knowledge production surrounding the 2022 Iran protests, especially during the time of heightened media coverage. First, he emphasizes the difficulty of providing timely analysis during rapidly unfolding protest situations, where verified data on participation, demographics or success are often unavailable. This creates a gap between media demand for assessments and the actual state of empirical knowledge, requiring researchers to foreground their methodological limitations and avoid premature conclusions. One particularly sensitive example is the use of the term „revolution“, which was adopted by activists as a political goal but should not, *Sydiq* (2024) argues, be used analytically without risking misrepresentation or even endangering protestors. He notes that international media framings can be cited in Iranian court cases against activists, where accusations of foreign-backed regime change are used to justify repression. He also considers researchers as informal gatekeepers, especially when acting as intermediaries between media and activists. While such mediation may seem helpful, it raises serious ethical concerns in authoritarian settings where even contact with foreign actors can increase surveillance or harm. Finally, he warns of the highly politicized nature of discourse around protest, where scholarly input can be appropriated to serve pre-existing political narratives, thereby reducing the visibility and complexity of social movement dynamics. This affects not only whose voices are heard, but also how protest is interpreted, frequently through the lens of state capacity, sanctions or regime stability, rather than through the agency and strategies of protesters themselves (cf. 2024: 586-591).

Despite these challenges, I aimed to gain information into the dynamics of protests in Iran during a specific period. By navigating ethical dilemmas and methodological constraints, I

strived to contribute responsibly to the understanding of how protests unfold in authoritarian regimes, centralizing the protestors of the movement. Despite efforts to include a range of perspectives, representation remained a challenge in this study. Three out of four protest participants were based in Tehran during the time of the protests. This created a certain urban and central perspective, which does not fully capture the diversity of experiences across Iran, particularly in regions with different ethnic or socio-political conditions. While attempts were made to include participants from other backgrounds, including ethnic minorities, this was only partially successful due to limitations in access and security. Language also shaped the research process in important ways. Although the interviews were primarily conducted in Farsi, which facilitated building trust with the participants and enabled access to a field that might not have been as easily available to non-Farsi-speaking researchers, it is important to acknowledge that my Farsi is not at academic-level proficiency. The process of transcription and translation, particularly when done with the help of digital tools, may also have led to some loss of meaning or context. Despite careful attention to accuracy, some of the emotional or political subtleties may not have fully carried over into the final texts. This complexity was also mirrored in participants' own reflections. For instance, one interviewee, Ghazal, noted that although she remained closely engaged with developments in Iran, she could not speak with full certainty about the present dynamics of the movement since living in exile meant no longer experiencing events on the ground directly.

6 Findings

While chapter 4 examined dominant repertoires as documented in academic and sources, articles and reports, the following sections outline lived experiences of protest and repression of the WLF Movement as articulated in the conducted interviews. These findings aim to provide a deeper understanding of how individuals performed and perceived resistance under state repression. The following chapter presents the central empirical findings identified from the qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with participants and one expert of the WLF Movement in Iran. Their accounts offer insight into how the movement was understood, practiced, adapted and sustained in the face of evolving state repression. The themes that were developed reveal a dynamic interplay between repression and resistance and demonstrate how protest is not static, but constantly shaped by external pressures and internal rearrangements, leading to an evolving repertoire of resistance.

6.1 Tactical Shifts under Repression

Thematic analysis identified that as repression intensified during the WLF Movement, demonstrators adapted their strategies in response. One recurring theme across interviews was that resistance in Iran is not static but constantly adapts to state countermeasures. One interviewee remarked that „people often find loopholes or unexplored avenues and once these are discovered, the government steps in to close them, prompting people to seek new paths” (Interview 4). These tactical shifts took multiple directions. In some cases, repression led to a more confrontational stance. Some interviewees described how the use of live ammunition, tear gas and mass arrests provoked an emotional and at times physical escalation from demonstrators (Interview 1; 4). One participant noted: „as they increased their intensity, people also reached a point where they felt they had to respond in the same way” (Interview 1). While the initial phase of the movement focused on marching and chanting, increasing levels of repression, including violent crackdowns, led some protesters to adopt more aggressive actions. These included throwing stones, using Molotov cocktails and in some cases, using vehicles to block or confront security forces. This escalation was not always planned but described as an emotional response to the brutality protesters experienced (Interview 1). Alongside physical actions, the language of protest also became more direct. Slogans that had initially focused on justice became more radical, with direct verbal attacks on political figures such as Khamenei.

In contrast, other protestors developed lower-risk forms of participation. As the dangers of public protest increased, people found ways to remain active without exposing themselves to arrest. This included actions such as quietly being present in protest spaces, recording videos or writing slogans at night. The simple act of being visible in public without speaking or chanting was viewed as meaningful. In a situation where any expression could carry consequences, presence itself became a symbolic act. Protesters coordinated these actions through informal channels such as peer networks and word of mouth, which allowed them to adjust their level of participation based on the risk involved. Another example of adaptation involved the use of cars as a protest tool. One interviewee described how traffic was intentionally created in key areas to slow down police and disrupt control of public space. Sitting in a car and honking the horn was seen as a way to participate while remaining relatively safe (Interview 1). Economic resistance was also part of the low-risk adaptive repertoire and took various forms, including boycotts of certain brands perceived as cooperating with the government, strikes by workers in different sectors such as the oil fields and bazaars and widespread shutdowns of entire neighbourhoods and bazaars, particularly in Kurdish areas. At

the same time, Interviewee 4 did not consider the movement to be successful at generating widespread strikes.

6.2 Aid and Refuge Networks

As the state's repression grew more severe, one essential part of the WLF Movement's adaptation repertoire became what I called „informal infrastructures of care and protection“, like the emergence of medical assistance networks. One interviewee explained how the threat of arrest at hospitals restricted access to formal healthcare, which led to the emergence of unofficial medical networks like „Redsun.“ As an alternative to state-run facilities, these networks provided care in secret or private settings. Supplies were transported to the most critical locations after being smuggled from safer areas or overseas. So-called „Safety housing systems“ also expanded, especially in provided to the crowded areas of large cities like Tehran's Ekbatan. These places became temporary havens for demonstrators attempting to avoid arrest or government surveillance.

Additionally, thematic analysis revealed that acts of solidarity on the ground supported collective resistance in addition to being supportive gestures. Protesters intervened to free others from arrest, resisted while protecting peers and collectively boycotted institutional spaces like segregated dining halls. These forms of support were not formally organized but arose organically through mutual trust. One aspect of this support structure was the intergenerational exchange among student activists. More experienced participants mentored younger ones, offering legal advice, sharing protest tactics and providing emotional reassurance. As one interviewee recalled: „the students themselves tried to have each other's backs. And many of the students who were more experienced or had already graduated would often give us advice. (...)That was really helpful. Just the act of sharing experiences and trying to make sure people didn't feel isolated or paranoid really mattered.” (Interview 4) Another example of solidarity was found in information shielding. One protester, under threat of torture and imprisonment, chose to withhold the names of fellow activists (Interview 2).

6.3 Self Protection

As repression intensified during the movement, participants described how self-protection became an integral aspect of protest participation. With the risks of arrest, surveillance and violence increasing, some adapted their behaviour and appearance to enhance safety. The

interviewees offered detailed accounts of the tactics they used that allowed them to remain active while minimizing exposure to danger. Some of the most common strategies were related to clothing, mobility and the use of personal devices. One interviewee recounted how she avoided bringing her phone to protests to reduce the risk of being tracked, wore dark clothes to blend into crowds and chose running shoes in case she needed to flee. She also carried cigarettes with herself, which she and others believed could help lessen the effects of tear gas (Interview 1). The expert provided another example of tactical knowledge-sharing, explaining how guidance on self-protection circulated via Telegram channels. She mentioned that people shared advice on how to build self made protective vests from books. Another protestor described the use of physical protection in protest spaces, particularly how protesters began constructing barricades and carrying shields to protect themselves from bullets (Interview 3). Escape and evasion were also part of many protest routines. Two interviewees emphasized the importance of large crowds for maintaining anonymity (Interview 3; 4). Collective presence, in this sense, was also a safety strategy. Digital self-protection was another recurring theme. One interviewee shared that she gave access to her social media accounts to a trusted contact abroad in case she was arrested or detained (Interview 1). To her account, many other protestors did that too. Similarly, another interviewee described avoiding mobile phone use during protests to reduce the risk of being tracked or identified (Interview 4).

6.4 Adaptive Digital Infrastructure Under Censorship

In response to widespread digital repression, surveillance and recurring internet shutdowns, the interviewees recounted the development of a digital infrastructure that was flexible and able to support protest coordination and communication. The widespread digital filtering and surveillance, including the wiretapping of phone calls and tracking of individuals via mobile devices, led many to abandon regular communication entirely. As one interviewee noted: „I turned off my phone and disconnected completely after realizing I was being tracked” (Interview 3). In response, some protesters used encrypted platforms like Signal, Telegram and Session, which many people said were better for privacy. These apps made it possible for a more decentralized coordination, especially when other ways of communicating were not available. Protesters often downloaded and tried out several VPNs to get to platforms that were blocked. One person said, „I remember that we had at least 10 to 11 different VPNs on our phones. We would test them to see which one worked that day“ (Interview 1). Protesters in some areas, especially in the Kurdish regions, used mobile contracts from Iraqi Kurdistan to

get access the Internet. This let them stay connected even when the internet was shut down in some places. In addition to that, the diaspora and international supporters also played a big part by helping with technical support, like getting VPN access and Starlink equipment, through personal contacts and networks abroad (Expert Interview). This outside help helped Iranian activists keep limited access to the internet and added to the larger network of resistance during times of increased repression.

6.5 Diaspora and International Amplification

Paralleling the protests and repression within Iran, the WLF Movement expanded to the Iranian diaspora, where Iranians abroad took on the work of amplifying protest messages and gaining international attention. Interviewees consistently recounted how acts of solidarity from outside Iran increased global visibility and provided emotional and psychological support for activists and detainees inside the country (Expert Interview; Interview 1; 2; 3; 4). They described protest events in cities like Berlin and Toronto as sources that gave them hope and morale for continuing to protest in Iran. The amplification occurred especially in digital platforms. The expert described that she used Twitter, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook to share information by Iranians on the ground and report on state violence. She and other activists of the diaspora translated and posted protest updates, videos and casualty reports. Telegram channels functioned as alternative media, replacing censored or non-existent domestic news outlets. Another critical function of diaspora engagement was the documentation of repression. The expert documented deaths, injuries and human rights violations, often in collaboration with international human rights organizations. These documentation efforts were the basis for advocacy in human rights bodies and were viewed by the expert as essential to holding the regime accountable (Expert Interview). After fleeing Iran, protestors like Interviewee 2 used their positions abroad to speak in Western parliaments and organize rallies. These acts were framed by him as extensions of the protest movement rather than separate or symbolic gestures.

6.6. Spatial Adaptations

In the context of the WLF Movement, protest did not unfold only in the form of marches or slogans but also in a spatial sense. As state repression escalated, protesters responded by transforming the physical environments they inhabited, reimagining how space could be used as a medium of resistance. University campuses became one of the most visible sites where

protest was spatially enacted and repressed. Interviewee 4 recalled how students challenged gender segregation rules by intentionally gathering in mixed groups outside university dining halls. What began as a spontaneous refusal to accept separation evolved into a sustained confrontation with authorities. When the Basij militia attempted to reassert control by locking the cafeteria doors, students responded by returning in numbers, eventually forcing them to withdraw. In retaliation, university officials constructed a new dining hall to restore institutional control. This back-and-forth revealed how space itself became a battleground and how protest was embedded in the daily routines of campus life. As he explained: „we were trying to do something at least. To not let the atmosphere go back to being normal. We wanted to maintain the abnormality of the space.” (Interview 4) The refusal to allow a return to „normal“ underscored the symbolic stakes of physical presence. Strategies focused on the spatial sphere persisted in other urban contexts outside of university property. In Tehran, large residential complexes such as Ekbatan provided both opportunities for decentralized protest and physical protection. Demonstrators were able to move, hide and regroup more easily due to their maze-like layouts. Interviewee 3 highlighted how knowing one’s neighbourhood and having allies nearby could mean the difference between escape and arrest and the expert explained how protesters used these spaces strategically. Windows and rooftops served as platforms for mass protest at night. As one interviewee recalled: „I think from a certain point on, from around 9 p.m., everyone would go up to their rooftops or to their windows and chant slogans. We would do that almost every night. And it became something kind of familial - everyone would chant, clearly visible, from their windows or from the rooftop.” (Interview 1) These nightly chants, which were sometimes met with violence, including shots fired into apartments, may were attempts to maintain resistance when gathering in the streets was no longer safe.

Ritual spaces were also identified as an adaptive repertoire. The 40-day mourning ceremonies for killed protesters, traditionally moments of private grief, became protest sites. Cemeteries were used as meeting places and were turned into spaces of protest. The expert explained how activists and families came together in these places, essentially turning shared grief into protest. Additionally, regional and intersectional solidarity was interconnected with spatial adaptations. One participant emphasized how demonstrations originated in historically underprivileged regions like Kurdistan and Balochistan, where women started taking off their headscarves in spite of the increased risks they faced (Interview 2). These areas, which had long been

characterized by ethnic discrimination and state neglect, became important parts of the movement.

6.7 Shift to Everyday Acts of Resistance

Thematic analysis identified that, following the WLF Movement's large-scale gatherings, the forms of resistance in Iran have increasingly taken the form of common, symbolic acts, particularly those ingrained in daily life. The expert and the participants explain how protest has not vanished but has instead taken on quieter, more persistent forms (Expert Interview, Interview 1; 2; 3; 4). The normalization of women's unveiled public appearances is an important example of this change. Interviewee 1 explains that in places like cafés and restaurants, it has become common to see women without headscarves, even in conservative cities: „Still today, I've seen very few people wearing long coats or tightly wrapped headscarves. Basically, young people, those up to maybe 30 or 35, most of them are unveiled. At most they have a scarf around their neck. It has become completely normal. And the government doesn't say anything. In cafés and restaurants, everyone is completely without hijab, they wear blouses and pants. These things - I think these are signs that it is still continuing. This is also a form of protest.” (Interview 1) Her account, supported by the other interviewees, suggests that visible acts of dissent are now widespread, particularly among younger generations. Interviewee 3, speaking from exile, noted that the state continues to send threatening messages to unveiled women, but this has not stopped public protest. She acknowledges the limits of her perspective from abroad but underlines that her friends and contacts describe the situation as a moment, where women are increasingly unwilling to return to earlier norms. This defiance, even when met with intimidation, signals a refusal to comply quietly. „Women's resistance continues too. Most recently, for example, there have been threatening texts, SMS messages, to women who've decided not to wear the hijab.” (Interview 3) Another interviewee characterizes these choices not just as responses to repression but as expressions of an alternative way of being. He describes this form of resistance as „living as though the revolution has already happened” (Interview 4). Interviewee 2 adds that public celebrations in minority regions such as Balochistan and Kurdistan, such as dancing or celebrating Nowruz in the streets, continue despite the presence of hijab surveillance cameras in cities like Esfahan and Shiraz. He interprets this not only as bravery but as a sign of refusal to return to a time before the movement: „They are dancing, they are singing and they are

willing to be arrested... but they will not go back to the status before the Woman, Life, Freedom revolution.” (Interview 2)

7 Conclusion

This chapter interprets the findings of the study in relation to the research question: *How has the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement adapted its repertoires of resistance under authoritarian repression?*

Drawing on qualitative interviews and relevant scholarly work, the chapter argues that the WLF Movement serves as a significant case of how political action can be practiced and sustained under repression. Instead of retreating in the face of violence and surveillance, participants adopted adaptive, decentralized and relational repertoires of resistance that may challenge dominant assumptions about what counts as protest.

The intensification of state repression, through arrests, surveillance technologies and physical violence, did not lead to suppression of the movement, but reshaped its form. As public spaces became increasingly militarized, protesters recalibrated their tactics to continue resistance in less predictable, more fragmented ways. This dynamic confirms what *Johnston* (2018) describes as the protest-repression nexus, where repressive measures simultaneously deter and lead to new forms of mobilization. Participants responded to the increasingly narrowing political space by engaging in small-scale, improvised actions that extended into the domestic, digital and symbolic spheres. Rooftops, alleyways and even rituals of mourning took on a political note and allowed protest to persist through spatial adaptation and the repurposing of everyday life actions. These practices align with *Bayat's* (2010) concept of non-movements, which describes how unorganized, yet collectively resonant actions can shift social norms over time. Through repetition and diffusion, informal gestures such as chanting from rooftops or publicly appearing unveiled became embedded forms of dissent, although carried out without formal leadership or planning.

Adaptation also occurred in the digital sphere, where protesters relied on encrypted apps, rotated VPNs and developed peer-to-peer information flows to share tactical knowledge and avoid detection. These patterns reflect what *Moqadam* (2025) has described as fractal scaling: the sharing of tactics and safety practices through informal networks instead of through

organized leadership. Digital adaptation thus was not a substitute for protest but can be interpreted as a necessary infrastructure for its survival. It allowed resistance to carry on even as physical gatherings were disrupted or seen as too dangerous.

Alongside tactical shifts, the findings suggest the emergence of informal infrastructures of care and solidarity. These networks formed out of necessity, as hospitals, universities and other public formal institutions became sites of state surveillance and repression. In their place, participants created decentralized support systems that included covert medical care, emotional support, legal mentoring and shared safety practices. These were not formalized NGOs or political organizations but trust-based relationships that enabled the movement to persist in a more fragmented form. As *Scott's* (1990) theory of infrapolitics suggests, such everyday acts of mutual aid operate beneath the surface of official politics yet can carry significant political weight. In the context of the WLF Movement, acts of care, like protecting one another, sharing shelter and knowledge, were not just support for protest but can be interpreted as part of the protest itself. By sustaining activism and offering protection, these networks challenge dominant Western notions of protest that focus on visibility and formal organization. Rather than being centred on confrontation, this mode of resistance emphasized collective care and survival.

In this context, the movement's persistence depended on these relational forms of resistance. Rather than organizing around public demands or visible leadership, participants sustained dissent through everyday solidarities. This form of politics did not seek recognition from the state but refused its terms of engagement altogether. Refusal itself thus became a central practice of the movement. This is particularly evident in the embodied acts of noncompliance described by participants. Actions such as refusing to wear the hijab, reclaiming mixed-gender university spaces, or participating in Nowruz celebrations in Kurdish and Baloch regions represent a kind of resistance rooted in everyday life. These acts were repeated gestures of disobedience that gained power through their ordinariness. *Bayat's* (2010) concept of social non-movement again helps to understand how collective resistance can emerge from uncoordinated individual acts. When thousands of women choose not to wear the hijab despite surveillance, their shared refusal can form a network of resistance. Through repetition, these everyday acts may subtly shift the limits of what is seen as acceptable and publicly expressible.

This dynamic also reflects *Honig's* (2021) feminist theory of refusal, which frames refusal not as passivity but as a form of political engagement that disrupts dominant structures and insists

on alternative ways of living. In the WLF Movement, such refusal took shape through practices that interrupted patriarchal control without relying on institutional visibility. Refusal in this context appeared not as silence or disengagement but as a way of acting in the present differently. Participants did not wait for institutional change but „lived“ alternative futures in the now, by refusing to return to previous norms posed by the Iranian state, by protecting one another and by insisting on public presence even under threat. This resonates with recent reports indicating a visible increase in women appearing in public without the hijab across Iran (cf. Ghazi & Najibullah 2025). Despite intensified surveillance and the reinstatement of morality police, many women continue to defy dress-code regulations in everyday settings such as streets, cafés and workplaces. This growing visibility suggests that individual acts of refusal are accumulating into a broader, diffuse form of collective resistance. What begins as personal disobedience may gradually redefine social norms and challenge state control as well as patriarchal expectations. In this sense, the persistent resistance of unveiled women in public life exemplifies how small, embodied acts of refusal can collectively expand the boundaries of political expression under authoritarian rule.

These findings imply that under authoritarian conditions, protest does not necessarily rely on conventional forms of visibility. Instead, it can unfold through sustained acts of solidarity, care and endurance that challenge dominant structures without open confrontation. The WLF Movement illustrates how informal and decentralized practices, when collectively done, can constitute a form of resistance that is both disruptive and resilient. These are practices that may hold particular significance for feminist and Global South movements. By broadening the understanding of protest to include not only explicit demands for change but also alternative practices of solidarity and presence, this study emphasizes that such adaptations do not represent withdrawal. Rather, they reflect a transformation of protest into embodied and everyday forms that enable movements to persist and sustain resistance under repressive conditions.

8 Future Research and Limitations

This research aims to contribute to the field of International Development by exploring how grassroots movements in the Global South operate under conditions of authoritarian repression. By examining the WLF Movement, it provides empirical insight into how decentralized, adaptive repertoires of resistance reshape civic space and redefine the boundaries of political

engagement in authoritarian settings. The findings underscore the agency of marginalized actors, especially women, students and ethnic minorities and show how informal, everyday practices can accumulate into transformative political force. Drawing on *Bayat's* (2010) concept of non-movement and *Scott's* (1990) infrapolitics, the study highlights how resistance can also take place within day-to-day life, outside the scope of formal organizations. In doing so, this study aims to expand the scope of Social Movement Studies by decentring Eurocentric protest models and highlighting the tactical creativity emerging from the Global South. This thesis adds to a growing body of research that examines informal, decentralized practices of resistance as key drivers of change from the bottom up, especially in a context where authoritarianism is globally on the rise.

At the same time, this study has clear limitations, since the qualitative interviews are based on a small, qualitative sample and does not claim to speak for the entire movement or its many regional variations. This study focused on urban protestors and student-led initiatives due to methodological constraints and ethical concerns. Interviews were only conducted with activists outside of Iran. This necessarily restricts insights into experiences of those still within the country and may underrepresent more localized or rural contexts. The qualitative method also limits the generalizability of findings. Rather than offering generalizable conclusions, the study seeks to provide a focused, interpretive account of specific experiences and practices within the WLF Movement. A broader investigation, incorporating additional voices across regions, class and political affiliations, would exceed the scope of this project but remains a promising field for potential future research, since this thesis leaves some questions open: How sustainable are these adaptive, decentralized forms of resistance over time? Can such repertoires generate structural change or do they risk being contained in symbolic defiance? It would also be interesting to explore how the WLF Movement intersects with class and broader socioeconomic struggles in Iran. Finally, further comparative studies could show how similar adaptive repertoires emerge under authoritarian regimes in other contexts. Exploring these dynamics of resistance under authoritarianism may offer insightful perspectives for reconsidering how protest and its development are understood in authoritarian contexts.

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Figures

Figure 1: Khatam, A. (2023). Mahsa Amini's killing, state violence and moral policing in Iran. *Human Geography*, 16(3), 299-306. <https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1177/19427786231159357>.

Appendices

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