

## INTERVIEW WITH GINA LENNOX FOR KURDISH CHANNEL, NORWAY

**SALAH** *As you know, one year has passed since the general uprising of the people of Kurdistan and Iran against the Islamic regime, which began with the assassination of Jina Amini. 700 people were killed, thousands were wounded and tens of thousands were imprisoned.*

### **SALAH: How do you evaluate this protest movement?**

Jina's protest movement has had successes and failures.

1. In Iran, Jina's death in custody and her burial in Saqqez a year ago mobilised people from all ethnicities, occupations, social classes and political persuasions.
2. Girls and women gained courage to defy the regime's requirement to wear a hijab and held protests, led protests, and spoke at protests (as they did in 2017 and 2019).
3. Men supported women, chanting side by side 'Jin Jiyan Azadi' Kurdish for 'Women, Life Freedom'. This chant was translated into multiple languages and internationally adopted as a cry for peace and justice, and protests gained international attention.
4. Kurdish organizations like KDPI and Komala, called for a general strike. In Rojhelat – shops shut up. Streets were deserted except for 'pop up' protests.
5. The protest that called for women's rights evolved into protests demanding the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, the rule of old mullahs and their Islamic Revolutionary Guards. People had lost faith in reformists.
6. Some members of the security forces showed sympathy for the protesters.
7. A year on, a surprising number of well-known eulogists commemorated Hussein's death at Karbala by singing about the Jina protests, the bloodshed, the will of the people and the need to replace the Islamic Regime. This is truly extraordinary.
8. To commemorate the first anniversary of Jina Amini's death, most Iranian Kurdish parties united to declare a general strike. Shops and businesses in Rojhelat closed. Streets were deserted.
9. During the initial protests Iran bombed Rojhelati Kurdish organisations in Bashur. A year later Iran is again threatening to bomb Rojhelati Kurdish organisations in Bashur if they don't move away from the border and disarm. They are moving, but they refuse to disarm. And Bashuri authorities are refusing to disarm them. Who knows how Iran will react?
10. The bravery of the Iranian women challenged governments as far away as Australia to respond. In Australia, a Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Reference Committee called for submissions and held hearings in November on what the Australian Government could do to help Iranians. Kurdish Lobby Australia made a submission and attended the hearing.
11. A year on, the Australian government is holding round table discussions between Iranian organisations for the same purpose. KLA has been invited to attend. But these sort of event must be more frequent to be effective.

So, these protests that began with Jina's tragic death in custody became a demonstration of people power that brought a cultural change in

- relations between men and women in Iran, and
- a mind set in and outside Iran regarding Iranian women,
- and a mindset that the Islamic Republic can be replaced, and
- showed a willingness of the international community to support the people of Iran.

Other than these changes, it is my sombre assessment that this mobilisation of people power has failed to lead to any significant, long term, political-economic, judicial or security changes in the Islamic Republic.

I would truly love to be proved wrong.

1. It's just that the Majlis and IRGC are dominated by Conservatives who have learned nothing from the protests. The majority are blind and stubbornly opposed to any reform.
2. We are told that the protests lacked leadership, and they certainly lacked strategies to sustain momentum and achieve concrete outcomes.
3. After a brief period of apparent leniency, the Islamic Republic's security forces and judicial system cracked down with their usual brutality. A year on, security forces continue to arrest and imprison protesters and protesters continue to go before revolutionary courts where their conviction is based on a confession gained under torture.
4. There has been no progress on any of the protesters' demands. Despite Reformists and even some Conservatives and Revolutionary Guards proposing more lenient hijab laws, and for the Guardian Council to no longer vet candidates for election, changes have been regressive. The new 'Hijab and Chastity Law' under consideration is even more harsh than the existing law. If introduced, women and girls can be arrested and sentenced to prison for up to 10 years for wearing a hijab inside a car, at their workplace, or anywhere outside the home.
5. Monarchists have hijacked the debate about what should replace the Islamic Republic.
6. Kurds, who started the protests, are being branded separatists working for US interests.
7. Non-Persian ethnicities like Kurds and Baluch remain as isolated and oppressed as ever.
8. And leading up to the first anniversary of Jina's death, Rojhelat has been militarized and
9. Iran is threatening to attack Rojhelati groups in Bashur.

**SALAH: The main driver of this revolution were women. How do you see women leading in this revolution?**

Young school age girls and Women held their own protests and were on the frontlines of other protests. They were fearless figure heads, and speechmakers. From around the grave of Jina Amini the powerful and poetic Kurdish slogan 'Jin Jiyan Azadi' was chanted. It was positive, catchy and, initially, non-threatening to the regime.

But I also think that support of men and organisations were vital to help spread the message geographically, and across time. After all, a successful revolution needs the support of people from all segments of society.

**SALAH: Why did the regime of the Islamic Republic stop suppressing this uprising with such intensity?**

From my understanding the Islamic Republic was slow to react to the Jina protests because the old mullahs dismissed the female-led protests as unsustainable, and because the world was watching closely. As the protests continued, the regime rapidly returned to its brutal ways, particularly with Baluch and Kurds. People were killed and injured during a protest or arrested and imprisoned and given summary trials. Based on confessions elicited under torture, the judge in revolutionary courts gave the protesters long prison sentences, or the death penalty.

**SALAH: What is the impact of this women's liberation movement on the people of the world and especially the Middle East?**

This women's-led protest may have challenged world stereotypes about women in Iran and the Middle East, as have the Kurdish female warriors fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but, in general, I do not think these protests have significantly impacted women's status on the ground anywhere.

It has taken 60 years of women's liberation in the West to achieve incremental changes. The struggle for democracy, women's rights, ethnic rights, animal rights, any rights, is constant and ongoing. This is because the people are asking elites, invariably dominated by men from a particular ethnic group, to share power. (Incidentally Women who join these elites can be as possessive of their power as their male counterparts. It goes with the territory.)

Also, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the tools employed by elites have expanded - mass surveillance, mass media generated stereotypes, and weapons of mass destruction. Hence, all over the world, women continue to be less inclined to self-promote, give uncensored opinions, or travel an unbeaten path. Of course, there are exceptions.

**SALAH: How can the democratic countries around the world support the Iranian people's movement?**

International institutions and democratic countries can support Iranians in various ways.

1. They can hold international forums and speak out about the issues, and
2. Take crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court, and other courts, matters like:
  - 1/ the frequent use of torture, especially when forcing a confession;
  - 2/ the use of Revolutionary courts where one judge can give long prison sentences or the death penalty on the flimsiest of evidence;
  - 3/ The use of the death penalty, especially for political prisoners;
  - 4/ the Guardian Council having veto power over candidates wish to run for election;
  - 5/ All discriminating practices related to gender, ethnicity, language, religion, education, and work.
3. Then there are boycotts and sanctions. For these to be effective levers on policy and

behaviour they must apply to the individual and their extended family, and the boycotts and sanctions must specify a goal or end game. For instance, if you boycott and sanction a revolutionary court judge, prosecutor, security guard who kills or tortures a protester or prisoner, or who imprisons a teacher of the Kurdish language or a conservationist, then their extended family must also suffer, so they can put pressure on the individual. The sanction or boycott should only be lifted when the main individual ceases their work or behaviour and becomes willing to provide evidence before an international court.

4. Countries need to review the current 'global order' and the functionality of a UN based on nation states that:
  - is ineffectual in preventing or shortening war, and
  - provides no ways for non-state actors, including First Nation indigenous people like Kurds, to hold nation states to account.
5. The UN needs to consider introducing pre-conditions for the right to be on the Security Council or to speak at or vote in the General Assembly, or head or participate in a committee.
6. The UN urgently needs to back rhetoric with consequences by establishing and enforcing positive and negative levers to coerce governments to serve rather than oppress people.
7. International bodies and democratic countries need to provide resources so exiled Iranian individuals and groups can network and formulate alternative visions for Iran, as occurred for Iraq in the 1990s, and for Iran, when Europe supported the Council of Iranian Democrats in 2018 and held a meeting of the parties in the European Parliament in June. But this process needs to be regular, ongoing, and transparent.
8. Such network discussions could:
  - a. Gather evidence of ongoing abuses.
  - b. Identify police and military personnel who are uncomfortable with the actions required of them.
  - c. Allow Iranians of different ethnicities and political perspectives to discuss ways forward in strategies, organisation, and political frameworks.
  - d. Identify leaders from different sectors of Iranian society.
  - e. Advocate well thought out, political alternatives to clerical rule, and
  - f. Avoid the opposition being hijacked by extremists, or vocal unpopular groups like the monarchists, who may never have lived under the Shah, and are looking backwards rather than forwards.

**SALAH: What steps should the Australian government take to contain the Islamic regime. Are economic blockades enough to stop the killing of Iranian people?**

Australia can advocate for all these measures and introduce some of them on their own accord. Since December 2022, Australia has sanctioned 24 Iranian entities and 31 individuals, including Revolutionary Guards and members of the judiciary.

In September alone Australia sanctioned:

- two senior members of Tehran's policing apparatus;
- Iran's cyber police unit;
- a web-hosting service that is used to conduct surveillance & restrict internet access;
- a state-funded broadcaster and
- two journalists who broadcast coerced confessions.

What hampers investigations is that the Australian government refuses to publish names of sanctioned individuals and what hampers sanctions is that the Australian Government refuses to sanction the whole of the IRGC, as many Iranians want, because Australia classifies the IRGC as a government agency, and government agencies cannot be sanctioned under Australian Law. Iranians would like this law changed, but that takes time. Generally speaking, Australia has a very conservative approach to foreign affairs.

Despite an increase in sanctions and boycotts these have proved ineffectual because the Islamic Republic has learnt to live with and circumvent four and a half decades of sanctions. Also, they often hurt the people, rather than the decision makers. In addition, in this transactional world, the USA and Europe are more concerned about Iran's nuclear weapons potential and spread of influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere, than they are concerned about Iran's human rights record.

Under the circumstances, Australia could adopt a number of policies on its own initiative.

1. We can offer asylum, and permanent residency to protesters and their families, as well as lawyers, journalists, teachers, and activists whose lives are in danger, and we can offer the same to Iranian asylum seekers languishing in Australian detention centres.
2. We could offer university and TAFE scholarships to students in Iran and Iranians in Australia.
3. We could provide Iranian individuals and groups secure, encrypted means to communicate within Iran and between Iran and the diasporas.
4. Australia could provide resources for Iranian government approved NGOs approved to undertake in-country training courses, and co-management in the fields of water, land and biodiversity conservation, infrastructure development, drought mitigation; animal and plant breeding to increase productivity in dry conditions; green energy, the establishment of international standards for air, water, and land pollution, and standards for the use of chemicals. The more contact and consultation, the more ideas can be exchanged.
5. Australia could also re-start the Australia-Iran Human Rights Dialogue overseen by the Dept of Foreign Affairs, and
6. Australian businesses and government departments could condition Australian trade and investment on Iran complying with internationally accepted human rights and environmental standards, although the economic imperative will likely takes precedence.

Back in 1980 - 1981 I rode a motorbike through Iran heading for India and back to London. Iranians were kind and generous in their hospitality. After the overthrow of the shah, there was so much hope for the future. That was before that crushing eight-year war with Iraq.

Now, sadly, I have reached the conclusion, as have many Iranians, that it is too difficult to change the character of an Islamic Regime protected by its Islamic Revolutionary Guards. The power and wealth, religious and military strength of mullahs and their guards are too entwined.

A study of revolutions in Africa found there were six ingredients for a successful revolution. The Iranian people have managed four of the six ingredients.

1. A history of rebellion
2. Mobilisation of all segments of society
3. Women's participation and leadership and
4. Support from regional and international stakeholders.

Iranians have yet to:

5. Gain the co-operation of military and police and
6. Identify respected leaders who can replace current leaders.

I would add a seventh ingredient:

7. An organized opposition movement that crosses ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and political boundaries that can formulate strategies and alternative political frameworks which could be put to a vote nationally or at a provincial level.

After 120 years of struggle to establish some form of democracy, it will be a miracle if Iranians can attain a genuinely democratic state that offers justice and opportunities to all Iranians. But Iran is a multicultural, multireligious country. Kurds, Baluch, Arabs, Azeris, Turkmen, Sunni, Zoroastrians, Bahais and the like need to convince Persians on both the Marxist Left and the Monarchist Right, and the neutral or undecided in between, that nurturing Iran's cultural richness - implementing measures of self-determination so all cultures flourish - would enrich all Iranians.