

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & The Iranian Diaspora Collective PART ONE

JVN [00:00:05] If you imagine a synchronized swimmer, like, in those fifties movies, when they, like, dive into the pool, that's what I'm about to do right now. But I'm going into the episode. So in recent months, if you have scrolled through Instagram, if you've seen the news, then you have probably seen the phrase, "Woman. Life. Freedom." These three words are so much more than that. They're a revolutionary rally cry around the world. Moj Mahdara and Nicolette Mason are founding members of the Iranian Diaspora Collective, a non-partisan multi-faith group that is inclusive of multiple backgrounds, gender, and LGBTQIA+ identity. So I would love to start with just setting the stage for us, Nicolette. So I think a lot of us have seen, know a little bit about what's going on in Iran, but don't know the full scope, don't know how things started. And I think just for getting everyone up to speed, can you start us off with where this all started and who Mahsa Amini is.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:01:04] How this all started, on September 16th, 2022. Just over six months ago, a young, 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman whose name we know as Mahsa Amini. Her name is Jina. Jina Mahsa Amini. And we'll get to that in a minute. She was visiting Tehran with her family, which is the capital of Iran. And compulsory hijab is the law of the land under the Islamic Republic, which is the name of the government in Iran. And so that means that you are required, if you are a woman or girl over nine years old, to wear a headscarf. When you go outside, you're in public and so on. Jina was in Tehran with her family traveling from Kurdistan. She was out and wearing her headscarf as she was required to do, but the morality police called Gasht-e-Ershad in Iran, who are guidance patrol, supposedly, who patrol the streets, they are part of the security forces of the Islamic Republic are responsible for citing people, arresting people for these moral, quote unquote, "infractions."

And it's very subjective, but they decided that her hijab was not being worn properly, and so they brutally, forcefully detained her. She was taken into custody, was subject to really severe head trauma, and died as a result of those injuries that were inflicted upon her by the morality police. And when news broke that this had happened, because it also wasn't the first time a young woman had been killed by the morality police, the country immediately went into protest. These were protests that were being led by youth, that were being led by women and girls and by ethnic minorities in Iran who are really taking to the streets and saying, "We've lived under this regime for over 44 years now. Enough is enough. We don't want to live under these theocratic laws anymore, under this barbaric government, under this system that oppresses women and minorities and LGBTQ people and workers. Fuck this, we're fighting back." And that was a big turning point for people in Iran. But for Iranians in the diaspora, people like myself and Moj, who—our families fled from the Islamic Republic during the revolution in 1979—it was also a moment of calling to arms in a way for us to really do whatever we can to support the people in our motherland.

JVN [00:03:50] Yes.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:03:01] And then the other thing I want to talk about is the name Mahsa Amini: so part of the law under the Islamic Republic is also a control and subjugation of ethnic minority cultures and traditions. So the fact that Jina was a Kurdish woman is inherently part of this movement as well. It wasn't just that she was targeted as a woman, it's that she was targeted as a young Kurdish woman. And the name that we know, Mahsa, was her government name. And the reason that even happens is because Kurdish people in Iran are so marginalized, so oppressed by the government that it's actually illegal to give Kurdish people traditional Kurdish names. So either the name Mahsa was assigned to her by the government or it was chosen for her so she could have a government name. But the name that her family called her, that her community calls her, that is on her gravestone is Jina. And the name Jina in Kurdish comes from the word "life." So the slogan, "Woman. Life. Freedom," "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" in Kurdish. It's the same root, right? It's about life. And her life was taken from her. And what people are fighting for in Iran is for autonomy over their own lives.

JVN [00:05:07] She was a 22-year-old woman in Tehran and just out with her family. These people come upon her. She ultimately loses her life due to the injuries that she sustained that day. But before that, like, who did she want to be? Like, who was she? And, like, how do her friends and family remember her?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:05:31] I think that one of the things that's been extraordinary about this revolution is being able to get a window into the lives of these young people. If you think about the context of what's going on in Iran, 50% of the population is under the age of 30 and over indexes in female. And so what's been extraordinary is seeing these videos of her dancing with her family and celebrating and jovial and joy. And there's this saying, which was sort of interesting for Nicolette and I when we first started getting into the work, you know, everyone would sort of explain to us this term called "zendegi mamooli," which is "an ordinary life." And for Americans, that's such a confronting idea because we're so consumed with this idea of overperformance of success, that for so many people around the world, the very aspect of—and vision of—just having an "ordinary life," and what does it mean to have an ordinary life? It means that you have agency over your body and expression and your language and your name. And so when you look at videos of Mahsa Jina Amini, you see a person who was loved, who loved her family, who was an amazing dancer. I mean, she just loved makeup, she loved beauty. She loved her hair. Like she just was gorgeous and beautiful and vibrant and like millions of young people in Iran.

And so I think that's what's been so heartbreaking is that we knew she was, we knew she was beat to death. But I think it's when we all saw the videos of her dancing and spending time with her family and shopping and all of the dresses she loved and her fashion and the music she listened to. And these parents bravely—I mean, that's why, I think that's why we've been called into this work—is when you see that these parents are taking such a huge risk to release

to the Internet what their children looked and lived and felt like because they want their children to be known for their vibrant energy they brought to the world, not they're defined by their deaths. I think that's one of the many, many things that has been insanely compelling for folks like Nicolette and I, who previous to this were not super involved in the work of Iran, which frankly, there are hundreds of people we've met who've been in this work for decades that are now good friends. And kind of like in the queer community, like, there's always, like, an older person that sort of inducts you into that culture and helps you understand vernacular and sexuality. We have had a bunch of people within the Iranian diaspora who've been at this work for years, help inducting us into—they tell Nicolette and I that we're in “Iranian immersion” right now. We're sort of coming to the end of phase one. And so it's been amazing to see who these people were previous to their murders.

JVN [00:08:33] Well, thank you for sharing your work and your experiences with us so openly as we start to get into what is one of our most highly requested, like, topics on Getting Curious, like, ever. It's just so many questions—myself and our listeners—like, everyone is so curious about, about what's happening in, in Iran. And so—and then just so that I'm right, because, like, Midwestern vowels, like, challenge me. Say it again for me, Nicolette?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:09:02] Iran. Iranian. Iran. Iranian.

JVN [00:09:09] In Iran. Ah, you guys, I like—

NICOLETTE MASON [00:09:11] You're doing great.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:09:12] Nailed it.

JVN [00:09:13] I know. But, like, having like, like, when you realize that, like, you've been in, like, the wrong syllables for your entire life. That must be really frustrating, like, just watching, like, American accents, like, just not get the pronunciation right, like, all the time. It would be, like, not knowing how to pronounce, like, “u”s or, like, “e”s. When you're saying, like, “United States,” like, you're, like, “It's not pronounced like that,” but, like, worse. And thank you for telling me!

NICOLETTE MASON [00:09:34] You know what—that's not on you. This is kind of intentional. And part of what we're trying to do through Iranian Diaspora Collective, too, is Iran as a country, as a culture, has been so mystified and purposely isolated and alienated from the rest of the world, right? Like, even the fact that the government in Iran censors the Internet to such extremes that you can't get on Instagram or TikTok or Twitter without having a VPN and bypassing Iran's Internet so you can get online. You can't share videos. There isn't a presence of foreign journalists on the ground in Iran. So this fracturing of information and disconnect of information between Iran and the rest of the world is really by design. And so I totally understand why people are confused or they don't know what's happening or they don't know

how to pronounce the right words. And even for Iranian-Americans, like, I grew up hyper assimilated. And I think this is the experience of a lot of first generation immigrants in general.

My mom's family came to the United States as refugees during the revolution in 1979. And part of their survival and their way of blending into culture here and making a life for themselves here was through this hyper-assimilation. So they didn't even call themselves Iranian. They called themselves Persian. And that's a whole other conversation and discussion. But, like, people know Persian food, they know Persian rugs, they know Persian people. But actually, like, what we are is Iranian. So that's all on purpose, right? And it's by design. Even if for Iranian-Americans, it doesn't have, like, an insidious root, necessarily. It's part of the mystifying and lack of understanding around Iran. And so what is so amazing about this movement and seeing all of this content coming out of Iran is despite this manufactured separation, the kids there, the youth, the Gen Z is just like us. They want the same things as us. They desire and have the same aspirations and dreams as us. They listen to the same music. There were five girls in this neighborhood of Tehran called Ekbatan, who were arrested because they were dancing to a Selena Gomez and Rema song, and it went super viral. Right? But, like, they're just like us. And that's something that really inspires us. And doing this advocacy for this movement here is knowing that there's so little that separates us from our Hamvatan, we call them, our, like, countrymen and women, our siblings in Iran, besides just borders and where we happened to be born.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:12:40] So the one thing I wanted to just sort of, like, ride on with what Nicolette just said is what has been so, like, a juxtaposition, I guess, for myself personally. And I kind of process this with Nicolette and our other co-founders all the time is: you're sort of raised in the West to have all of this, like, feeling sorry for Iran and Iranians, like, "Oh, these poor Iranians, they're stuck in this terrible, awful, place that's surrounded by inflation and lack of resources and sanctions." And George Bush calls it the "axis of evil." And all of those things are true. But the thing that happened during this revolution, watching all of these kids come forward into the streets and making content about this revolution as Gen Z is, you spend most of your time thinking, "Oh, they're the ones who are stuck." And on some weird level, I realized I was the one who was stuck. They actually know who they are. They actually have such a fire for freedom and a thirst for democracy that they're willing to do anything and everything for what they believe in, and what they feel they're entitled to in their whole community's entitled to. And on some level, it made me question how far I'm willing to go for the things that I care about. What conversations am I willing to have? What content am I willing to make? Who am I willing to be for the things that I—

Many, many people have given any credit for being someone who's on the forefront of so many issues, whether it was inclusivity or gay rights or trans rights or what the beauty industry looked for. And I realized, "Was I willing to die? Was I willing to be arrested? Was I willing to put my family at risk? Was I willing to be, you know, tortured, raped, drugged?" And seeing their courage has given me this insane level of confidence to step up in a different way. Because what I realized, I sort of think of us Iranians in the diaspora as sort of tamed, sort of

neutered, domesticated. I always think of us as domesticated. And they're, like, this potent, real, unabashed, like, vibrant expression of themselves. And I don't know if that lands, but it's just been something I think about a lot, all the time, because I'm, like, "Wow. Like, what if what did I do for Roe versus Wade? What did I do for trans rights? What did I do for," like, I went on the streets when it was safe and my right to march but, like, what I have done, if I was being potentially shot in the eye or drugged and, like, do you know what I'm saying? Like, it just gave me the confidence of, like, "Holy shit, like, these people are so here for it. Like, we have got to step up."

NICOLETTE MASON [00:15:28] Yeah. Like, Moj likes to say that we're like domesticated cats and that the youth in Iran are lions, right? And we have this term and phrase in Persian, Farsi language, that's "Shir-Zan," which literally means "lioness." And that's how we describe women in our culture as being lionesses who are brave and powerful and, like, give no fucks. They're gonna do what they want to get what they want and need. And that's truly what, like, to zoom out a little bit and give context to some of why Moj has been talking about in terms of the violence that people are subjected to. Right of assembly is not a right in Iran.

JVN [00:16:10] I'd love to ask some questions so we can get into this. So let's take us back to September 15th, 2022. It is the day before this has happened to Jina. What rights and freedoms did Jina have? Did Iranians have in, like, 2022 before this revolution started? Like, zoomed out level, for someone who doesn't know: what's kind of the day-to-day rules that someone would be facing in Iran.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:16:36] Yeah, I think it's kind of easier to think about it in terms of what people are *not* allowed to do, right? And so we all know the #FreeBritney movement. We were super involved in understanding conservatorships and the type of restrictions that are imposed on people when the state or someone in their family decides that they're not competent enough to make decisions on their own. We can think about women's rights in Iran through the framework and lens of conservatorship. So women need permission to travel from their husband or their father or whoever the next closest male member of their family is. You cannot obtain a passport without permission. You need permission to get married. You need permission to get divorced. Women cannot file for divorce. Women are not granted custody of their children.

JVN [00:17:31] Mmm. What if you're single? Like, it's just your dad gets to decide forever, or your brother?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:17:37] Mmhm. Forever, yes.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:40:13] Yes. Yes.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:17:41] Like you don't even get your own passport. Like when I first got my passport, my passport was attached to my father's passport.

JVN [00:17:51] I'm already going through, like, a Downton [Abbey] situation where I'm, like, "Okay. Like, what if, like, Dad's dead? What if you're an only child?" Like, is there, is there a way or, like, but then it's like Matthew Crawley, and then, like, your fucking third cousin gets to decide or something?!

MOJ MAHDARA [00:18:06] Your uncle! [CROSSTALK]

JVN [00:18:07] Ohmigod, so there's always some man in the family.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:18:10] Yep.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:18:11] You have to remember, and the context is, these laws were not at all this way in 1979. These are new laws.

JVN [00:18:18] In 1979.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:18:21] These are new laws, 1979, women—like, Nicolette that's going to unpack this for you. She's going to blow your mind right now.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:18:26] So then let's think about, like, more daily life. So we know that compulsory hijab is the law of the land. Also, public spaces are segregated by gender. Also, it's illegal to dance in public. It's illegal to sing in public. And it's also illegal for women to ride a bicycle. So all of these things are just obviously rules and impositions on daily life that restricts your movement. They restrict their bodily autonomy, they restrict your ability to self express and be who you are, and then add in the layer of, like, being a queer person or a gender variant person. Like, it becomes even more complicated and compounded. So we really try to make it as simple as possible for people to understand. Think of it through this lens of conservatorship, and then there's all these other layers as well. So there's no freedom of press. There is no free speech. There's no right to assembly. If you do get arrested for any of those things, like riding a bike or singing in public or dancing in public or writing a song that criticizes the government.

All of those things can come with very, very heavy sentences, including—if they decide, for example, in the case of Toomaj Salehi, who's a dissident rapper, who by the time this goes live, would have been in solitary confinement for 150 days since this movement started. He has been charged under the Islamic Republic's law for promoting propaganda against the state, and that comes with a death sentence. So all of the things that we really do take for granted, I think, in our culture here is around, like, freedom of expression and being able to criticize the government, being vocal about it. Literally, when people do that in Iran, they are risking their lives. And so the content that we're also seeing through social media and the protest footage that we're seeing through social media, even just being able to publish that and sharing it on the Internet, sending it to someone outside of the country. That also comes with the risk of a

death sentence. So people are going to such enormous lengths to make their voices heard and to make sure that we are hearing them, that we can then be their voice and amplify it further. That the least we can do for those people is listen.

JVN [00:21:00] And that's, like, so extra dangerous, I would imagine. Like the only VPN I have ever had to interact with is, like, when I'm trying to, like, get figure skating if I'm out of the country and, like, there's some figure skating event on that, like, I can't get in, like—it's not that hardcore, but I also know that there's digital footprints to everything. So, like, they really are risking so much, so—and I would imagine it can't just be some, like, basic VPN. It's probably got to be, like, hidden on your phone or whatever because, like, could the authorities just like come to your house if they track? Like, if you posted some TikTok or something, like, or some—if you were able to bypass it and then, like, a face was in there, and there was, like, some identifying feature, like, it's, like, everything, I would imagine, you could just be looking over your shoulder, like, all the time, right?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:21:44] So the Islamic Republic is one of the foremost experts in the utility of cyber armies using AI to find, you know, faces, places, what you were wearing. For example, people are being arrested even though they're dancing with their backs to the camera, based on who was at what corner, leaving their house at what time. They, they have incredibly sophisticated technology. Some of this technology is the same technology they use in China. Iran and the Islamic Republic have a close alliance with China, where this technology, especially some of these VPNs, to your point. Correct. So our work has been very interesting about how to covertly support the ground support of the protesters around even connectivity. One of the new campaigns that we're launching this year is a very large VPN starring project with our friend Yasmin Green, who runs Jigsaw, it's the head of connectivity at Google. They fundamentally believe that connectivity is a human right. And so average Iranian has, like, 50 some-odd VPNs that they have to rotate to and even then have a difficult time to connecting to the Internet in a consistent way. So, like, just imagine you're stuck in this experience and you can't even let your friends and family on the outside world know how you're living. And to your point, you are being targeted and hunted by the Islamic Republic and their cyber army, which is equipped with all of these technologies. So they are—this is why what you're doing is so important, because what these people are doing is putting their lives on the line to break through to your audience so that people can connect to their stories to care.

JVN [00:23:34] I think I saw something on my, like, Tok a few days ago that was like these women in Iran, like, walking without headscarves that I was, like, “Is this like real or not real?” Like, I didn't I couldn't tell. But then I saw other ones not that long ago that were, like, super much trauma warning. Like much trauma things, like, like much super hardcore trauma, things that I was like, “How did this even get past the sensitivity people like on the 'gram?” Because it was like, not that you shouldn't see because you need to know how severe it is, but, like, there were things on the news about, like, you know, people being put to death from the protests and like just, you know, people that, as you have said, like risked everything. So it's too big of a question, but I want you guys to just kind of, like, I'll ask it and then I just want you

guys to, like, go for it. What's, like, the evolution of the revolution been. Like, is the Islamic Republic, like, "Oooh, this was, like, way more intense than we thought, and it got way more eyeballs on it than we thought. And like, this is going to be fucking mutiny and like, we might get overthrown because like, everyone's so pissed." So they're, like, trying to stay in power. So they're, like, giving some things? A little bit of both? Depends on where you are? Like, Yeah, yeah, what's the evolution of the revolution? That's the question.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:24:40] Some of it does depend on where you are. Some of it does depend on class and access to quality of life. It depends on what your work life looks like. So there are a few things to understand about this. Iran is a huge country, so the population is 84 million people. A huge country. There are parts that are really, really urban and metropolitan, like the capital city of Tehran. And then there are other parts that are more rural and that have more working class populations and that are populated by ethnic minorities. So it's really important to think of this movement and also the landscape of Iran through an intersectional lens. It's not homogenous. Not everyone has the same type of life, same access to education, same access to upward mobility. And also because there's a lot of different ethnic groups and religious populations in Iran, they're each treated and have very different rights and freedoms. So that's another layer to it, right.

JVN [00:25:45] Reminds me of somewhere else I know.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:25:47] Right? And there are actually, like, a lot of parallels. And that's something we think about, too, is like, how do we connect all of these oppressions? Because they are connected. But we'll get there later.

JVN [00:25:58] Yeah.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:25:58] So in Iran, the protests started a lot in Tehran, the capital, also in Kurdistan. So Jina, we know, was from Kurdistan. She was from a city called Saqqez. And the frontlines of the protests were really densely in the cities in Iran and then also the Kurdish parts of Iran. And Kurds in Iran are an ethnic minority—they're marginalized, like we discussed earlier. And then there's other pockets like Balochistan, populated by Baloch people who are another ethnic minority in Iran that have also been heavily militarized by the government. So these ethnic minority populations and areas have been some of the most heavily militarized. They've faced the most violence from the regime, and they've been the most highly targeted in terms of opening fire onto protesters, detaining protesters, keeping them in solitary confinement and so on.

And so over six months, yeah, it's ebbed and flowed. There's areas that have kind of, quote unquote, "returned to normal" in some respects. There's other areas like in Zahedan, which is in Balochistan that has been militarized the entire last six months. And people still every Friday are showing up to march and participate in these anti-government protests. That's also happening in the Kurdish parts of Iran. But then you were asking about, like, wearing a

headscarf or not wearing a headscarf, and is this really happening? And it's still the law of the land, to be clear. Compulsory hijab is still the law of the land in Iran. But there's kind of been a point of no return. Culturally, people have really hit their threshold. Women especially have hit their threshold in terms of compulsory hijab. I think it's yet to be seen what will happen with that if it will turn into any real legal change because it is still the law of the land, but bigger than that, more importantly for us and also for people who are on the frontlines of this movement, the goal is not reform. The goal is not for the Islamic Republic to become more lax or to become more liberal in their laws. It's for the Islamic Republic to cease to exist completely and for a new democratically elected secular government to be put in place.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:28:29] And I would just say, because this is the one thing Nicolette, I got schooled on all the time is what the Iranian people want more than anything else is a referendum, which is they want the crimes against humanity to be held accountable, similar to, like, the end of apartheid. They want murderers, people who are child killers, rapists, people who've stolen people's assets and land. Because keep in mind, part of why this is such a huge deal is: this country was a place where women were highly educated, where the marriage age wasn't nine, but was 18, where women can drive, have credit cards, have bank accounts, travel on their own. People like my mom were educated and people like my aunt were educated. People like Nicolette's mom were educated at the highest level. You know, the Shah of Iran was a huge—like all leaders, have things that they could have done better and have been criticized. But the one thing that they could not be criticized on is they did a ton to move forward, women's rights. Could have been more inclusive to other ethnicities, but moved forward women's rights in a major way.

And so what the people of Iran want is a referendum, which is an accountability, because keep in mind, this revolution has been happening for a long time. It's new to Nicolette and I, but this started in the Green Movement 2009, where millions of people came outside for a rigged election. 2017 when they executed over 1500 people for similar activism, just happened in 2016. And many, many, many, many people say that the hijab is compared to the Berlin Wall in terms of ending a theocracy. And so this, for Iranians, for human rights activists, for gender rights activists, this is seen as the end of a gender apartheid, the end of a theocracy, the end of a regime that uses chemical weapons and warfare and violence and sexual gender based violence to control a people. And now they're controlling a 50% inflation rate. So now they're controlling starvation, gas, power, pollution to essentially force—so when people are, like, “Oh, the protests have gotten quiet,” you're, like, “Yes, because they shut down the gas, they've shut down the power. They've closed the schools.”

This country has 8% of the world's natural resources: oil, uranium, zinc, copper, lithium. Think about the business interests and agendas to control those resources. This country produces four times more oil than Dubai. You just saw, like, Beyoncé performing in Dubai in a skyscraper, right. Like, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is worth \$80 billion. Like, he didn't create Amazon or Alibaba. In addition to, like, a theocracy here, there's a business agenda. Like, all oppression, like all oppression is always stemming from capitalism that's gone wrong. Right.

It's not just that people are evil and maniacal and patriarchal. They are, but they're using these systems to create capitalistic structures that only benefit a few. And Iran is a theocracy. This Islamic republic is a business plan, an agenda. That supports a handful of people in Iran and a handful of people out of Iran throughout Europe and China and Russia that are in business with a country that ships 2 million barrels of oil a day.

JVN [00:31:54] Woah! Iran ships 2 million barrels of oil a day?!

MOJ MAHDARA [00:32:00] A day. This is not Afghanistan. This is not Syria. This is not Yemen.

JVN [00:32:06] How many do they do?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:32:08] Not anywhere close.

JVN [00:32:10] Okay. The Erin Brockovich-ity of this right now, like, my brain, you just literally took my brain out of my gay ears and, like, cracked it like a fucking egg. Jesus. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and please show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me and Erica Getto, with production support from Julie Carrillo, Chris McClure, and Erin McKeon.