

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

JVN [00:00:04] Okay. Islamic Republic, 1979. Okay, what do we need to know about this moment in history? Because all I know is, like, fucking Carter. Like maybe a hostage situation or something. Like, what happened with this Islamic Republic? Like, who's running it now? How did they come into power? Nicolette. Or Moj. Whoever wants to go.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:00:26] I'm going to give it to you in a mouthful and then Nicolette will riff. Okay. This started back in the fifties when Mossadeq, who was the prime minister, was removed from power by the CIA because he contested British Petroleum's power and imposition over this oil. They had built an amazing oil pipeline and refinery. Look, Iran was a third world country in the early 1900s. BP comes in. BP was created in Iran. British Petroleum. They pay for the refineries. They pay for the infrastructure. And then they basically give them, like, \$0.10 on the dollar. Mossadeq was the prime minister. He says, "I want a new deal." And the CIA, they got rid of him. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who is the Shah of Iran, they give him executive power over the entire country. Now, there's many things to be said about his successes and his failures. I personally think he did more good than bad. But he then wanted to renegotiate his deal in 1978 with the United States to say, "I no longer want to trade oil for military equipment, I want cash money."

JVN [00:01:31] Basically, the guy that the CIA removed was, like, "I want a new deal." They took him out, inserted a new guy, and his name was the Shah.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:01:39] Correct.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:01:40] So 1951, Mosaddeq is prime minister. He wants to nationalize Iran's oil supply so that everyone in Iran can benefit from this natural resource in Iran. So then 1953, British MI6 and the CIA undertook this operation called Operation Ajax to stage a coup and topple Mossadegh and take him out of power. So after the fall of the prime minister, the Shah—who's the monarch—Shah Reza Pahlavi was put into power by the British, the Americans, and the French. And then, 1978, there are mass strikes and protests against the Shah. There was a lot of discontent in this moment. It was also on the heels of this Persepolis 2000 celebration, which was this huge celebration celebrating the history of ancient culture in Iran, ancient Persian culture. And before that even happened in 1965, Khomeini threatened the Shah to make the country more Muslim. And then he was exiled to Iraq. He ended up taking refuge in France. He was hosted by France, also, and living there in exile. And then 1978, 1979 comes up and there's this discontent in the country and people like Khomeini see this as an opportunity to come in and take advantage of the discontent and anti-regime—Shah monarchy regime—protests that are happening to then come back into the country, which France helps him do, and unite with protesters.

A lot of them, by the way, are young students. They're liberal, they're progressives, and somehow they all get swept up into this moment with Khomeini, who then becomes this, quote unquote, "supreme leader" of the Islamic Republic. So in this period, '79, when the Shah leaves and takes refuge outside of Iran, Khomeini comes in. There are protests happening every day. Some of them are really violent. There is this hostage situation that happens at the American Embassy in Tehran that happens for hundreds of days, 444 days. So then this hostage crisis in Tehran also becomes part of the Carter-Reagan election. That is how we end up with then the Islamic Republic being in power and being in the government in '79. And there have been a series of anti-government anti Islamic republic protests since then. For the last 44 years. They've ebbed and flowed. The regime has become more violent during some of those. They have a history of mass execution. They have a history of imprisonment and detainment. They have a history of torture. And this becomes what the people are fighting against and living under for the last 44 years.

JVN [00:04:54] So. Okay. Let me repeat back, if I— Shah, and then it was, like, R word, Shah Reza, like, the 19, the one who became—

MOJ MAHDARA [00:05:02] Reza. Reza Pahlavi.

JVN [00:05:03] Yes, thank you, Reza. He gets installed by the U.S., and the British and the French and he was getting paid in, like, military equipment? Like, there was, like, a trade situation where, like, "We'll give you military equipment in exchange for your oil, then maybe you can take a little off the top or whatever. Like, you can just take a little, like," maybe there's, like, a little bit of that thing. And then after a few years, he was, like, "I don't want your military shit. I've built my own cool stuff. Like, I just want you to pay me the fucking cash." Was that a little bit of what happened with him?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:05:33] He was deeply in business with the government. He had enough military equipment that they—with all of these sanctions, it's been 40 years—and they still have planes and tanks and missiles. And so many are items we sold them. And he was deep in business with the Rockefellers, JP Morgan. This isn't, like, opinions. These are, like, 40 million documentaries about this. Like, he had debt lines, credit lines. He was an incredible business partner to the West. And the United States government and Europe had an incredibly discounted oil resource out of Iran. And he didn't want it to be discounted any more. He increased the price of the barrel to \$100. This is, like, something that every parent tells their child: he basically increased the price of a barrel of oil to \$100 a barrel, created OPEC—which was, like, a partnership between him and Saudi and Iraq to basically set the prices for oil. And the United States and British government were, like, "Uh uh, you don't set the prices. We set the prices."

JVN [00:06:42] And then they tried to topple him? How did he leave and then the Islamic—oh! That's when everyone got swept up in that Khomeini's, like, whole, like, he came in from France or whatever? That's when that happened?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:06:55] Yeah.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:06:56] Yeah. So there were protests because the people weren't necessarily benefiting from this increase in oil price. Right. The everyday people, everyday Iranians were not necessarily the ones benefiting from this. So there was a lot of discontent. There was a lot of unhappiness. There was feelings of, you know, the people are being exploited. And so how do we give this money that's coming into Iran to the people and have it enrich the whole country? Kind of, like, a side note to this is that part of that, too, was this effort for Iran to be part of, like, the global stage, right. For it to be seen in the same level as France and Germany and the U.S. It was a travel destination. Andy Warhol had a relationship with the Crown Queen, and a lot of celebrities were traveling to Iran. And so they wanted very much for Iran to be part of global culture and modern global culture. And I think some people in Iran felt that that aspiration was happening at the expense of ordinary Iranian people. So that's where some of this discontent and anger came from. And so there are a lot of different factions of the country who are upset and angry about different things. And a lot of people just got, like, caught up and swept up in it, and they were ready for, like, "anything but this." And the problem with anything but this is you don't know what you're going to end up with. And what they ended up with was really fucking bad. So...

JVN [00:08:36] It's almost giving, like, a Trump populism thing, like, Khomeini came in on, like, a, populism, like, "Let's help out all the people." But then he ended up, like, really exploiting them. And so then they've been dealing with this for, like, another 40 plus years. And it sounds like that regime has, like, grown, as you said earlier, like, increasingly violent. And all of this really boiled up to *this* moment of September 16th, 2022, which leads us back to: "Woman. Life. Freedom." And—well, what's the story behind that phrase? Tell us about what the story is.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:09:09] Nicolette, I feel like this is you, now. Nicolette loves this question. It's—the origin of this is a great story.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:09:16] I do love this question because I think this is something we all really care about—like, the three of us—is attribution and appropriation, right? And so the phrase, "Woman. Life. Freedom."—the origins of this phrase is from Kurdish culture and Kurdish resistance movements. And the phrase in Kurdish is "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî." And this is a slogan and sentiment and revolutionary statement that has a history of over 40 years. It's rooted in Kurdish resistance movements. It's been used for decades and it's part of Kurdish feminism. What the declaration being made really is through "Woman. Life. Freedom." "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" is that the interweaving of the words, "Woman. Life. Freedom." is very important. And you can't have one without the other, right? So the idea is that without women

there is no life. And without life, there is no freedom. And you can't have freedom unless there is freedom for everyone, including women. And so everyone's liberation, everyone's ability to live freely is predicated on the freedom of women. So that is really the origin of the phrase, and it's become part of the messaging and one of the slogans of this current revolutionary movement. But it didn't start September of 2022. It has a long, decades long history of over 40 years that has really been rooted in Kurdish feminist thinking and scholarship.

JVN [00:10:58] Go Kurdish feminist thinking and scholarship.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:11:01] That's right. Yes.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:11:02] And part of, I think, what's happened for the use of Iran is because Iran was originally a blend of Zoroastrianism, Jewish, pre-Islamic, you know, domination 1500 some odd years ago. This kind of return to, "Woman. Life. Freedom." as Nicolette mentioned, Shir-Zan, the lioness is essentially a return to sort of a matriarchal culture, which, if anyone within Iranian culture, will tell you their mothers are very much the most influential energy within the family unit and household. I never actually really understood what patriarchy really even was, even though I left home at 16 and had such a complicated relationship with my family. The one complication I never had with my family, even though we didn't speak for decades and had huge breakdowns, was my dad was always a feminist. And it shocked me to my core that this country that was once occupied by a group of, you know, people, that gender equality was far more important to them, has now been dominated by this, like, archaic, like, random, feels not even native to the origin. So a part of what the youth of Iran have done is they have reclaimed the actual origin of their country, of origin, of their culture and reclaiming "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî," "Woman. Life. Freedom." as a mantra and a way of being—not just for Iran, but for the world.

JVN [00:12:42] Yes. So some of the content that I saw coming out of Iran highlighted the importance of hair, like, there was a lot of, like, signs of protests with, like, cutting our hair. Getting rid of hair. Sometimes I do "our" as, like, a codependency thing. *Women* cutting *their* hair in Iran to protest. And so, like, one thing that we're really into on Getting Curious—and just, like, me personally—is that, like, hair is so much more than beauty. It's, like—it's history, it's culture, it's how we connect with each other. It's, like, science, it's politics, it's like self-expression. Like it's so much more than just like this—it's just it's so much more than, like, vanity. It's like, what's the significance of hair been in this movement?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:13:21] I mean, you, you got it right. It's self-expression. It's part of how we show people who we are. It's where I get to have fun by putting my JVN Air Dry Cream and my hair in the morning and seeing what happens with my natural texture. So, I think that's a big part of it is a lot of the criticism of compulsory hijab, right. Is that, "Oh, well, that's part of the culture. So we don't have a right to criticize it." It's actually not part of the culture, necessarily. My family, for example, is Jewish Iranian, so wearing a headscarf has never been in my family's culture. It was something that was imposed on the people by law a couple

of times through history in Iran, but most recently after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It wasn't right away. It was after the fact that it became law of the land for all women and girls over the age of nine years old to wear a compulsory hijab. And it became the law. Right. And I think for a lot of people, they obeyed that law. They were compliant with that law because the risk of not following that law was so grave and so extreme, whether it was detainment or being jailed, being killed, certainly getting fined, to some degree. There's just been such enormous consequences for not following that law.

And so first, removing the veil became an act of protest. Then also women cutting their hair became an act of protest because it was their way of saying, "This is mine. I get to decide what I do with my hair. I get to decide if I cover it, what it looks like. You don't have that control. I do." There's this really incredible video of a protester pulling her hair up in a ponytail. She's not wearing a headscarf and she pulls her hair up like she's heading into battle. And it's the last footage of her ever in existence, because once she entered that protest, she was shot by security forces. And it's—I can't even, I'm sorry, I can't even talk about it without paying and getting emotional because we have all these bits and pieces of people's stories and sacrifices for having just the most basic freedom, right? The most basic autonomy over themselves and their self-expression. And we've gotten to know them through these little clips of videos and something that I don't even have to think about everyday, right—like, what I do with my hair, like, I get to, I get to decide and I don't even have to think about it that much—takes on such an enormous political meaning when actually, like, you don't get to choose for yourself.

Someone else has chosen for you your whole life, and the only time you get to choose is in the privacy of your own home or at a friend's house or at a party. Anywhere else in public, you don't have that choice or liberty. So it really has taken enormous meaning. And I think one of the things we've seen is just how creative women in Iran are with their hair. There's so much fun hair coloring and really beautiful styles. And I keep coming back to this idea of, like, "They're just like us," right? Because the kids that we're seeing videos of and the photos that we're seeing with like purple perm hair and they have asymmetrical haircuts, like these are like the kids who live in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, except they're in Iran living under this theocratic, totalitarian, violent regime. And even under that, they're still like, "I get to choose, I get to decide." And, like, that is so power. I don't know. I'm so sorry now. I mean, I do, but, like, it's really powerful to see people take ownership of their bodies when their whole lives they've been told they cannot have that ownership.

JVN [00:17:36] Mmm. That was gorge and devastating and when you first started saying it, I thought that it's not—I didn't think that she was going to end up. I just, that is just so—you should, if that doesn't make you emotional then, like, you would not be a human. So thank you for sharing that. And that is just devastating. And I'm going to circle back, but I want to, that leads into this question which, like, this is obviously like a fast moving situation. People's whereabouts, their safety, people going missing, people being imprisoned, people who are at risk of execution. Like, what is the situation for people who are missing? People who are

imprisoned? I think what I saw on social was just, like, "Sharing this information helps." But is there any other ways that, like, money can get infiltrated in there to, like, help people? Like, is there some, like, low key bail fund for like, like, people and—or no? Like, is there like, what can we do? Like, how can we help?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:18:36] There's a lot we can do to help. We can support our senators and congressmen to ask them to support things like the MAHSA Act. There in Europe and then the United States, the diaspora is active. There's 3 million of us that are hyperactive in North America and throughout Europe that are doing everything we can to put forward policy. But, for example: getting the Islamic Republic expelled from the Women's Commission at the United Nations. That's a function of social empowerment influencers and people like Jessica Chastain and Angelina Jolie stepping up to make this a human rights issue. When Iran, the Islamic Republic, is systematically breaking the charter of what human rights is based on the understanding of the United Nations, that there's a time for every and all governments doing business with the Islamic Republic in any way, in any way, whether that's supplying cement or steel or paper or ink or anything to essentially cease doing business with those governments, stop putting them in business and demand that the people of Iran be allowed to peacefully protest, because what they're demanding for is change. They want a new secular, democratic country. They've made their wants very clear.

And so we live in a world where businessmen and politicians decide the fates of many of our outcomes. I think it's time for people to get engaged. We're seeing what's going on with Afghanistan, we're seeing Syria, we're seeing Yemen. This region needs a reset, and the best way to reset it is to go for the ugliest tumor of them all, which is the Islamic Republic. And so what people can do is say, don't talk about it such that all of us as citizens, we've all done amazing things by getting active around trans rights and gay rights and, you know, all the work everyone here does for representation, both on a capitalistic level and a policy level, getting engaged as a global citizen, I think that's one of my biggest aha. I was such a domestic activist. I was such a domestic participant. I was focused on, "What's the beauty industry doing? And what are we doing for gay people? What are we doing for people of color?"

What I realized is: so many of these tumors are systemic globally, and it's up to us to reeducate ourselves, to be active, to care about what's going on in Afghanistan, and to care about what's going on with the women and people of Iraq. And so at the end of the day, I think it's about education and isn't getting active and finding out. There are many people on the frontline doing amazing work, which you can find out the Iranian Diaspora Collective, on our social. And we advocate for those policy workers who do great work. But they don't have notoriety and fame and access. So Iranian Diaspora Collective's mission is to bring awareness to people who are doing that good work and supporting people on the ground. To your point, there are NGOs that support people getting out of bail money, and we are driving attention to organizations who are doing this work and how they do it, you know.

JVN [00:21:39] So it's great to make sure that we follow there. Love. So what's, like, the next step for protesters? Like, what's the situation on the ground at this point? Like, is the Islamic Republic just trying to figure out, like, how to stay in power and, like, quell the demands of the protesters?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:21:55] Yeah, I think they're definitely scrambling a little bit. I think that there is also a lot of confusion in terms of what is happening on the ground, and that's on purpose. It's by design. There is a big desire for the regime to kind of act as if, like, the protests are over and everything's back to normal. And that's really not true. It's not the case. In fact, you know, Nuwruz just happened and Nowruz is the celebration of the New Year in Iran. It's a very ancient and loved cultural holiday and tradition. And through this holiday, there was also another wave of protests. And rather than just saying, "Happy New Year," to each other, people were also saying, like, "Death to the regime." And that's really powerful, right? So the strategy has kind of changed on the ground. The approach has changed on the ground. The movement is very much still happening. It's just happening in a different way.

And then there are again, like we talked about, pockets where the protests on the streets are still very, very much happening as well. So that is still very much present. There's just like a lot of different approaches to getting to this finish line and getting to this goal of overthrowing this government. So, I think TBD a little bit. But we are really committed to seeing this cause through and supporting people who are on the ground however we can. And as they're reassessing *their* strategy, we're also reassessing ours, right? Like, what's the best way to support them from here? We have to have a dynamic approach and respond to current events as they're unfolding because that's the nature of what we're dealing with. This isn't linear. This isn't going to be quick. It's not going to be easy. So we need to think non-linearly and creatively and dynamically in order to support people on the ground to the best of our abilities.

JVN [00:24:01] How is, like, working with people on the ground going for the IDC and, like, what's it been like and feel like to do your advocacy work from the U.S.?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:24:11] It all comes down to: these guys are willing to put their lives on the line. They are going so far out of their comfort zone. They are speaking in broken English. They're singing to songs that they know will resonate with us. I am trying very hard to not sink into my own concern and fear and to lean into, "How can I best educate myself and our team." And we talk a lot about safety and appropriateness. But this feels like a calling for us and for myself that is undeniable. And I've never been afraid to step forward for the rights of myself and others. I have always been willing to go to the march, go to the protest, open that business on the side, confront brands and beauty brands. Like, how much of that team was Black and Indigenous? How much of, how do they treat people who are non-binary, gay and trans? What are the rights of working moms? So I feel like, honestly, all of this training and work both in capitalism and philanthropic for me, prepared me for this moment. And we listen to the people on the ground a lot. We talk to many, many, many people on the ground who

are at the forefront. They're on some level, we've kind of become their bridge, their connection, and we're grateful that they trust us. And...

NICOLETTE MASON [00:25:35] Yeah. I mean, we really are in constant communication with people who are on the ground there, whether there are friends who we've made through this movement, people who are activists who we've worked with. We did an out-of-home campaign that was 136 billboards across L.A., New York, DC. It was the first project that we did together, and we worked with anonymous Iranian artists on the ground in Iran to create that campaign and create the visuals who were so proud of being part of it that they wanted their names on everything, even though they knew that they would likely be targeted by the regime and they would likely be arrested. We had one incident where an artist who we worked with was arrested, thank God, knock on wood, he's released and he's been safe. We have another incredible activist who we work with who is now out of the country. And so these are real people who we have built relationships with, who we've been able to work with and who, like Moj said, we're so grateful that they trust us and that we're able to have this open communication.

I think, like, the most important thing for us is we took this call to action of, "Be our voice," from the Iranian people and really, really took that to heart. And very earnestly we were, like, "Okay, you want us to be your voice? We are going to be your voice on the loudest stages we can possibly find." And that's why we put up a billboard in the middle of Times Square that reached tens of millions of people. We just wanted to make sure that people's eyes and ears and their hearts more importantly, were being captured so that we wouldn't just become apathetic and turn away to another injustice that's happening under our watch. As I'm talking about this, something that's really striking to me about all three of us in our individual path and our careers and our lives and our advocacy, is that a big part of who each of us are as individuals, and then, like, our quote unquote "brands" is about freedom to self express and freedom to be yourself and about advocating for LGBTQ rights and representation and legislation and body positivity. And how do we embody our, our bodies and our selves wholly. But we've never had to necessarily think about the freedom to talk about any of those things, and that's what's happening on the ground in Iran. They also care about the freedom to self-expression, about the freedom to love who they love, to embody the gender presentation that feels most accurate and true for them. But they can't even talk about those things the way that we do.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:28:24] I know Nicolette and I have spent a lot of time talking about our own privilege. We have so much privilege. Like, the fact that I even get to exist here, the way that I view, the living I get to make being who I am. I make a living being who I am. I'm encouraged. I'm written about, I'm compensated. And I'm a venture capitalist. I'm an investor, I'm a brand builder. I have nonprofits. And to think about sometimes that if I lived in Iran, you know, I would be getting forced gender reassignment. Like, even, I've thought about the journey I went through to even have top surgery. And so much of that was confronted by that if I lived in Iran, I would have been forced to transition, like, into a man.

JVN [00:29:14] The first episode of Getting Curious I ever did in November of 2015 was, "What's the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims and why don't they love each other?" And I had this, like, historian of Islamic history from UCLA come on. His name is Dr. James Gelvin. And, like, the second time we interviewed him, he was, like, "Interestingly, randomly in Iran, there was, like, this fierce, like, trans activist in, like, the eighties, and she kind of, like, got him to change his, like," but, like, not I'm not trying to say that, like, forced gender transition, like, forced anything is never okay but—that's interest, that there is at least a way for...

NICOLETTE MASON [00:29:55] It is interesting but also think about it because then the way that trans woman is treated, because trans women, of course, are recognized as women, as they should be everywhere, she is going to be treated the way women are treated there, which means what? You don't have bodily autonomy, you have to get permission. Exactly. And so it's kind of like this idea of Iran being, like, supposedly "trans friendly," but also only binary trans people who pursue full, medical, and surgical reassignment.

JVN [00:30:27] Right, many caveats.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:30:28] Right. Many, many, many caveats. They've kind of, like, used that to be, like, "Oh, look how progressive we are." But, like, literally, if I was in Iran as an out lesbian, like, it would be legal for my family to do an honor killing and, like, that would be fine.

JVN [00:30:44] So don't give them credit for the whole, like—

NICOLETTE MASON [00:30:48] Don't give them that much credit.

JVN [00:30:49] And then also another thing I was thinking of: I would imagine like reproductive autonomy or like health care is like, not a thing. Like if you don't, you couldn't go, like, get an abortion if you didn't have your husband's permission? So abortion's just, like, not even a thing?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:31:08] So it definitely was. Kind of the same way abortion has always been a thing here, right? Abortion happened. It didn't necessarily happen illegally. Under the Islamic Republic, 95% of abortions that happen do happen illegally. But one of the, like, really horrifying things that we were hearing, especially in the beginning of the protests, just to underscore, like, how horrific this regime is and, like, massive, massive, massive trigger warning for this is that women and girls who were being detained and jailed—protesters—were begging people to get them abortion pills and begging people to get them emergency contraceptives because they were being sexually assaulted in jail. And were in this devastating predicament of, "What the fuck do I do?" Right? And so that is part of the way this regime also tortures people once they're detained, it's not enough that they're detained for protesting. It's not enough that they have no freedom of self-expression. Also, once they're detained, they're denied an attorney. They're denied due process and they're going to be

violently tortured and sexually abused while they're detained. And like that is known that, like, CNN did whole reports based on just this. It is horrific.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:32:33] There's this picture that I'll text you of the first person, the first protester that was executed. His prosecutor was also his judge, okay? He literally wore a different outfit. One outfit as a prosecutor and then changed his outfit into another outfit to be the judge to sentence him.

JVN [00:32:52] Has the Islamic Republic, like, relented on *anything*? Have they said, like, "Okay, we're not going to prosecute any other protesters, we're not going to," like, I hear that the protest isn't, like, over. But, like, how do they—how are they able to sell, like, "life is back to normal" in Tehran. Like, did they give up anything?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:33:09] So there's a few really important points here, right? So up until this past couple of weeks, we have known of over 19,000 protesters who were detained. Four official executions happened of protesters. There have been hundreds, hundreds of executions that have happened in the last year, not related to the protests, specifically. Also, we can assume sham trials, no due process, etc. But there's been a recorded close to 20,000 protesters who were detained and imprisoned. Just the past couple of weeks, the regime—again, it's impossible to verify this—the regime has said, "We are going to pardon and release 22,000 protesters." Up until this point, they've even been denying that there has been arrests. They have been denying that there were mass protests. They've been denying that people were in prison. But now they're saying, "We're going to release and pardon 22,000 people." It's significant because it's the first time they're acknowledging that these people have even been imprisoned for protesting.

What is not really possible to verify is if that's actually happening. There's been a few instances of individuals who have been released who that same day of their supposed release have been taken back into custody, kidnapped, and once again jailed. This is, like, on video. We know this. There was an activist named Sepideh Qolian who was imprisoned for over four years, four years in jail. She was a journalist. She was imprisoned for writing about labor movements in Iran. And she came out of prison and a video of her went viral saying, we're going to bury this quote unquote, supreme leader. And that same day, within hours of her release, she was kidnaped from the car that she was in with her family and taken back to jail. So the truth is, we just don't really know truly what is happening. But anything the regime says, anything that comes from, like, official state media and state sources, we should question because they are telling the story they want to tell and they are genius, propaganda researchers and manipulators of the truth.

JVN [00:35:33] So correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like it could be, like, a "We're going to do a release and pardon so that things will go to a status quo but you cannot rise up again because, like, you won't get this next time. But we may, like, go quiet on compulsory hijab for, like, a year, two year, three years, four years until it becomes, like, politically advantageous for

us, like, when, like, people being more conservative, like when we can blame my progressive ineptness on, like, y'all showing your hair. Like, we can blame that." Like, right? It's giving, like, right-wing conservative something.

NICOLETTE MASON [00:36:06] Yeah. And, like, you mentioned this earlier, right? Like, this regime is, like, grasping on straws, trying to do whatever they can to stay into power and, like, hold on to the power that they have left. And part of that is like trying to change public sentiment and impressions of their government from the rest of the world. And so being able to say, like, "Oh, we're releasing and pardoning 20,000 protesters," without the caveat of, "These people are going to be detained again the same day. These people have to confess that they committed these crimes and apologized for these crimes that they never actually committed." Like, there's this whole list of caveats of who is even eligible for pardoning and release. That's not part of the headline. What they want people to see and to hear is: they've released prisoners. And then everyone else can be, like, "Oh, they're changing. The laws are getting better. The quality of life is getting better." It's all propaganda.

JVN [00:37:03] So, the IDC supports Iranians' fight for a revolution and the formation of a new, non-theocratic democratic government. So what needs to happen at this point for the revolution to succeed?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:37:16] Western governments have to decide that that's an interesting idea and that it's better to have a new secular, democratic Iran to do business with than it is the Islamic Republic. They have to be willing to reinvent what those business lines are and re-imagine what a stable, equitable Middle East looks like, not just for Iran, but for Afghanistan and Yemen and Syria. And obviously, the tragedies that have taken place within Iraq. And so, look, if we don't reset our political agenda within the Middle East with Iran? China will. Russia will. There are other countries that will take advantage of that business opportunity. And so for me, I am a little bit scandalous in the sense where I am always encouraging people to think about this not just as a humanitarian effort, but a business opportunity for a business opportunity with a country that has an enormous consumer potential, has high amounts of intellectual output. You know, we're talking about, "Look at the 3 million people here in the diaspora. This is a hyper educated group of people that want to contribute on a global level."

And so if you want a stable Middle East, if you want to end Hezbollah in Palestine, you want to free Palestine, you want to save Israel, you want to end what's going on in Syria, you want to end the murders in Yemen. You have to end the numero uno top dog criminal here, and that is the Islamic Republic. They are, for all intents and purposes, the largest crime syndicate in the world. And what Nicolette and IDC and I are focused on is the cultural issue. We are here to reintroduce the Iranian people, the youth of Iran, to the public at large. We are not the hostage crisis. We are not the nuclear deal. We are not Ayatollah Khamenei. We're, like, an incredible 4000 year old culture rich with art and culture and dancing and beautiful hair. And what the youth of Iran are saying is, "We're here. We want to participate. Please don't forget about us."

NICOLETTE MASON [00:39:22] There's also this phrase that's been really popular through all the protests is, "We don't want you to save us. We just want you to stop helping our killers and our oppressors." So stop doing business with the regime, stop enabling them, stop legitimizing them as a government and as an authority, because that hurts people in Iran. We're not asking for people to be saved. Nobody, nobody I know, wants military intervention. Iranians really do not want military intervention from outside foreign powers. We just want you to stop funding the people who are killing our family members.

JVN [00:40:01] So one thing I hear us saying is, like, we need to make sure that our representatives in the US, like, we need to understand, like, what their Middle East policy things will be. But in an even more direct way, how can our listeners support people in Iran and the IDC?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:40:15] In terms of supporting people in Iran, since we were just talking about policy, there are a couple of pieces of legislation that are on the floor right now to be supported. So the MAHSA Act is one to look into. That will basically allow the U.S. government to enforce and double bind a lot of the sanctions on members of the regime and people who are in power in the Islamic Republic's regime. So that is number one. It is currently on the Congress floor. It needs more support, especially from Democratic representatives, in order to move forward. We could petition Chuck Schumer to bring it to the Senate. Then in terms of supporting IDC, we have some really incredible initiatives coming up that we're so excited to launch. The biggest one that we're really thrilled by because we know it'll have a direct impact on people on the ground is our connectivity initiative that we are launching with Yasmin Green, who's the CEO of Jigsaw at Google. And that will be a way to give people in Iran at scale access to safe and secure VPNs.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:41:28] And so I would just add, we are now a501c3 pending. We are "always on" partners with Go Fund Me so you can contribute to our Go Fund Me, which is the most successful Iranian Go Fund Me ever. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Musa Tariq and his entire team a go fund me who've gone above and beyond to help us transition out of a one off billboard campaign into a entity that looks similarly to, like, a Stop Asian Hate, which is an always on 523 that's always here to raise awareness. And if you are someone that has a podcast or a show or has a platform and you want to do an interview with us or any one of our awesome smart surrogates, like, I think awareness is the number one priority right now.

JVN [00:42:14] And this is the question for both of you: what are your hopes for Iran?

MOJ MAHDARA [00:42:18] My personal hopes for Iran, given how much family I have there, is to return to a state of peace and optimism. I think Iranians are optimists and creatives and, I think, always want to see the more good than bad. And so I think to have a chance to reset that equilibrium. On a personal level, I very much have fantasies of living there part time. I often think about what brands would I want to launch, and what can I take over there that

they've been wanting. I think my wants on a personal level are a little bit more self, self-possessed in the sense that I want for me to be somewhere where I walk amongst my motherland, like, in my motherland. And then on a global level, I want for a world that has a safe Middle East. And I think about all the murdered children and people, and I think about how many people have lost family, I think about—I just want the end of this absolute tumor, I cannot think of a single thing that is good that the Islamic Republic has brought to this Earth. Pain and suffering and terror. Look at how many people are afraid to speak up because they're afraid. And I personally am not as afraid because I believe this is just propaganda that they create to, like, boogeyman, you, you know? But I think that they've terrified everybody. "Don't say anything." And, like, for people like myself who've been through trauma and abuse. Like, it's always really scary to have an abuser that you're afraid to say their name, that you're afraid to say what happened, that you're afraid to say what it is. And so for me, it's very healing, because as someone who is a survivor on multiple levels, I feel good to take on my abuser. And in this case, I think of my abuser as someone who grew up in a country very isolated from their culture as the Islamic Republic. They have abused my people and my family and everyone I love.

JVN [00:44:18] Nicolette. Same question. What's your hope for Iran?

NICOLETTE MASON [00:44:22] My hope for Iran, I hope for Iran in general is absolutely for youth and marginalized people in Iran, for LGBTQ people, for ethnic minorities, for people with disabilities to be able to live a good, equal and equitable life, and for their hopes and aspirations not to just live in their head, but for them to be able to actualize their hopes and dreams and aspirations. I think that's what everyone wants for themselves, right? It's, like, so universal. And then the other thing on a very personal level for me is to be able to go to Iran someday. It's always been a dream, and I know maybe that seems, like, I don't know, like, surface level or, like, not that deep. But for me, as a first generation Iranian American woman whose family were forced to leave, who were a religious minority, who never would have chosen to leave for themselves because it's the only home they ever knew. For me to be able to go there. Jewish. Iranian. Queer. Openly gay. Have a wife. To be able to go with my wife, to Iran, to this homeland that I've been forcibly disconnected from and disenfranchised from is truly one of the biggest dreams in my life. And I've been saying that for a year, that one of my biggest dreams is to go to Iran. And, like, whenever I do a stupid little, like, Instagram Q&A, people are like, Where do you want to travel? And, like, my biggest dream in life is to go to Iran and see this country and experience it for my own eyes.

And up until six months ago, that was never even remotely a possibility. Now, it's not just a dream and a possibility, I know in my heart it will happen. I know I will go to Iran. I know my mom will be able to visit for the first time since the revolution. She's never gone back. That is such a driving force for me. And then there's all these friends and connections who I've made through the course of this movement, who I talk to every day, like people who like I can't go to sleep if I haven't spoken to them that day. Right. Like, we all have those people in our lives. For me, some of those people now are in Iran, and I like every once in a while I'll say to my

friend, like, you know, like, “Soon we're going to be sitting in a cafe in Tehran laughing about this episode of The Last of US in person, instead of just, like, hoping we can get in touch with each other because we don't know what VPNs are going to work on this day.” And so, like, that's a really big dream for me. And I hope and believe that someday Moj and I—and Jonathan, maybe we can bring you with us, too. We'll be celebrating the first ever Pride festival in Iran. So, my queer little heart, like, really does believe these things will happen sooner than later in our lifetimes, like, as a certainty. I have to believe that, right? I have to believe that this will all happen. Otherwise, like, I wouldn't be able to keep doing this every day.

JVN [00:47:43] I can't think of a more beautiful way to end our podcast. I am so grateful for your time and for your work, Nicolette and Moj, and for sharing so freely your work and your heart in your mission. We will be including all links to follow both of you personally and also the Iranian Diaspora Collective. We're just so proud of you guys, and thank you for giving us your time. And we are just such big fans and we are just, like, just loved meeting you and ah! Keep up the good work.

MOJ MAHDARA [00:48:10] We love you!

NICOLETTE MASON [00:48:11] We love you, thank you!

JVN [00:48:15] 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, please 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.