

## ***Jin, Jiyan, Azadi: The Transformative Role of Kurdish Culture in Advancing International Humanization of the Kurdish Struggle***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the global impacts of the phrase “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” on advancing international solidarity with the Kurds. It analyzes how the usage of this phrase during the 2022 Jina Amini protests humanized and positively influenced global sentiment towards the Kurdish people in their struggle against human rights violations. Beginning with context on the Kurdish people and their involvement on the international stage, this paper analyzes the 2022 protests, focusing on the role of Kurdish culture and feminism in fostering solidarity with the Kurdish community.*

### **I. Introduction**

“I am not a hero, neither well-known nor superior.  
I am a poet who lives for Kurdish people.  
Whatever I could, I did for my people and my homeland.  
Whatever happened to me, I gave away with a careless smile.”

Kamaram Mukri [In Prison]<sup>1</sup>

The Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups without a state.<sup>2</sup> The over 40 million Kurds divided between Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria have faced human rights abuses ranging from genocides and expulsions of around 100,000 civilians<sup>3</sup> to having their culture outlawed in many of these states. To this day, the history of struggle and persecution continues to be experienced by Kurdish populations across nations. Historically, the international community has turned a blind eye on the Kurdish struggle, primarily due to the complexity of Kurdish relations with NATO-ally

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<sup>1</sup>Rebwar Fatah. *My Poetry Depicts You: An Anthology Of Contemporary Kurdish Poetry* (London: December 2017), 35.

<sup>2</sup>Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert, *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict. Vol. 10* (New York: Springer, 2012), 10.

<sup>3</sup>“Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds,” Human Rights Watch, July, 1993, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/1993/en/91717>.

Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The oppression of Turkish Kurds by Turkey, as well as Turkish-Kurdish conflicts that have driven a portion of the violence within Kurdish-majority Syria and Iraq, is politically inconvenient to many NATO members. For a Western state to support Kurds (regardless of region) often results in tensions between that state and Turkey; Sweden and Finland's attempts to join NATO, for instance, have faced disapproval by Turkey due to their reluctance to extradite Kurdish individuals to Turkey. Because of such pressures, the Kurds have been typically left to their own devices to face continual human rights abuses at the hands of their neighbors and governments. However, recent developments show glimpses of positive improvements in the international support of the Kurds—a critical change that must occur for the betterment of Kurdish livelihoods.

The 2022 protests surrounding the murder of Iranian Kurd Jina (Mahsa) Amini highlighted this shift in the international response to the Kurds. Mahsa Amini was murdered by the Iranian morality police in Tehran for improper hijab.<sup>5</sup> Yet Jina Amini's story and the legacy of the 2022 protests go further than just anti-hijab policies. Jina (Mahsa) Amini was visiting Tehran from her Kurdish province in northwest Iran, and when she never returned home, protests erupted in her community. The protests echoing her Kurdish name, Jina,<sup>6</sup> were the start of the international outcry for women's rights in Iran. The international chants of "Women, Life, Freedom" were sparked by the Iranian Kurds' "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi"—a phrase deeply rooted in Kurdish culture and formed by Kurdish freedom movements in Turkey in the late 20th century.<sup>7</sup>

For Kurds, these protests were a resistance against the Iranian regime for their long history of anti-Kurdish practices. Iranian Kurds have faced forced evictions and destruction of their homes, as well as a discriminatory *gozinesh* system which denies

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<sup>4</sup> "Are Kurds "Worthy Victims" in the Eyes of the Media?" Kurdish Peace Institute, last modified May 23, 2023, <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/history/are-kurds-worthy-victims-in-the-eyes-of-the-media/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Woman Dies in Custody of Iran's 'Morality Police'," Human Rights Watch, last modified September 16, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/16/woman-dies-custody-irans-morality-police>.

<sup>6</sup> "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Kurds," Minority Rights Group International, December 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2017/en/65167>; Due to intense censorship of the Kurdish language by the Iranian government, Jina Amini's parents were unable to officially name her Jina as it was a Kurdish name with connections to Kurdish culture.

<sup>7</sup> Eleonora Gea Piccardi and Stefania Barca, "Jin-Jiyan-Azadi. Matristic Culture and Democratic Confederation in Rojava," *Sustainability Science* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1278.

Kurds equality in employment and political participation.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Iranian Kurds risk their safety when using and teaching the Kurdish language or expressing Kurdish culture, and many Kurdish activists, such as Zara Mohammadi,<sup>9</sup> have faced arbitrary arrest and prosecution, even leading to torture and the death penalty. The unjust treatment and human rights abuses of Iranian Kurds were a central element of the Jina Amini protests.<sup>10</sup>

Although the arbitrary nature of Jina Amini's murder was not entirely uncommon for Iranian Kurds,<sup>11</sup> the community solidarity that followed her death captured global outrage and brought attention to the Kurdish struggle. While this sudden shift in attention can be attributed to a number of factors, the international spread of Kurdish culture during the Jina Amini protests played a central role in advancing and humanizing the Kurdish movement, especially through the phrase "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi". This paper seeks to analyze this moment in history and its impact on the Kurdish movement for freedom and equality.<sup>12</sup>

This essay will first focus on relevant literature on Kurdish history, discussing the Kurdish community, self-determination efforts, and the involvement of the West. It will then analyze the key forces currently limiting international support for the Kurdish movement. The movement will then be studied in relation to the role of the phrase "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" in promoting international advocacy efforts for Kurdish liberation. Through analyzing the global impacts of Jin, Jiyan, Azadi, this paper seeks to illustrate how Kurdish culture serves a pivotal role in advancing the Kurdish

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<sup>8</sup> "Iran: Human Rights Abuses against the Kurdish Minority," Amnesty International, July 30, 2008, [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/088/2008/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/088/2008/en/).

<sup>9</sup> "Iranian Kurdistan: Kurdish Teacher Sentenced to 10 Years in Jail," Underrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, last modified July 16, 2020, <https://unpo.org/article/21985>.

<sup>10</sup> Zara Mohammadi is a Kurdish teacher imprisoned by the Iranian government for teaching Kurdish language to Kurdish children.

<sup>11</sup> "Latest On Hundreds Of Detained Kurdish Protesters," Kurdish Human Rights Network, last modified December 30, 2015, <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/en/news/freedom/freedom-of-expression/2015/12/30/latest-on-hundreds-of-detained-kurdish-protesters/>; "Iran: Iranian Kurdish Man At Risk Of Execution," Amnesty International, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent-actions/iranian-kurdish-man-risk-execution>.

<sup>12</sup> In 2015, Kurdish Farinaz Kohsrovani fell to her death attempting to escape being raped by an Iranian security official. Farinaz's suspicious death resulted in a number of protests throughout the region, coined as the Mahabad riots, which led to further Kurdish deaths at the hand of Iranian officials. Additionally, a number of Kurds have faced death penalties despite vaguely worded crimes and unfair trials.

movement by improving public sentiment towards the Kurdish struggle and humanizing the Kurdish experience.

## II. Literature Review

### *Kurdish Identity Strengthened Through Violence and Resistance*

Despite the statelessness of the Kurdish people, scholars concede that the pan-Kurdish identity has developed especially since the beginning of the 1980s. Prior to this time, there was a greater focus on immediate tribal unity rather than an emphasis on a unified Kurdish identity, although there were traces of Kurdish identity and culture as well.<sup>13</sup> In particular, literature states that the creation of the modern nation-states of Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey has furthered Kurdish identity as Kurdish freedoms and cultures became threatened by the rise of nationalism and anti-ethnic-minority sentiment. In the paper *Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma*, Gourlay analyzes this phenomenon, concluding that traumatic events and human rights abuses emphasized the importance of a pan-Kurdish identity.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the 1988 Halabja Massacre and the 1980s Anfal Genocide in Iraq, which killed over 100,000 Kurds, alongside fights for Kobane and Rojava against the Islamic State [IS] in the early 2010s in Syria mobilized the Kurds of all four nations to unify and fight for the *Kurdayetî*.<sup>15</sup>

The book *No Friends But the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds* emphasizes the negative Kurdish reaction to the British-formed Middle Eastern borders post-Ottoman rule, which failed to give the Kurds their own state.<sup>16</sup> This trend of betrayal has culminated in the well-known Kurdish phrase, “no friends but the mountains.” The Kurdish people were forced to unify and strengthen to overcome patterns of betrayal and violence.

Scholars concur that violence generated a key characteristic of the Kurdish identity—resistance. The Kurdish Institute of Paris highlights patterns of resistance against assimilation, stating that ancient Kurdish ancestors “put up fierce resistance to

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<sup>13</sup>Jaffer Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, And New Media* (New York: Springer, 2011), 47.

<sup>14</sup>William Gourlay, “Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity And Cross-Border Links In Times Of War And Trauma,” *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 1 (2018): 25-42.

<sup>15</sup>Kurdayetî means “Kurdishness”, or a united Kurdish people.

<sup>16</sup>John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *No Friends But The Mountains: The Tragic History Of The Kurds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92.

the Arabo-Muslim invasions” in order to resist being Arabized in the early 7th century.<sup>17</sup> *Kurdayeti* strengthened Kurdish identity against modern Arab nationalism.<sup>18</sup> With the threat of violent assimilation, Kurds have found value in unity and resistance in order to ensure the survival of their people.

The idea of resistance continues to persist in Kurdish culture through various movements, ranging from more combative groups such as the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) to more pacifist groups such as the Peace Mothers, as well as cultural ideologies such as Jineology, or the science of women, that focus on women’s liberation in conjunction with national liberation. However, the general idea of modern Kurdish self-determination has transformed away from just a movement for a sovereign Kurdish state. While the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 created a drive for state sovereignty, many modern Kurdish movements champion democratic autonomy,<sup>19</sup> rather than an autonomous state.<sup>20</sup> The concept of democratic autonomy is also seen as a path for legitimization of the Kurdish movement in international politics. *Intra-Kurdish Interactions, Democratic Autonomy, and Peacebuilding in Rojava and Bakur*, a paper focusing on Kurdish political movements, and *Mimicry and Substitution in the Logic of Sovereignty: the Case of PYD*, which hones in on a specific instance of democratic autonomy in Kurdish politics, both emphasize the less violent nature of this form of resistance. By focusing on non-militant methods, democratic autonomy distances the Kurdish movement from violence and terrorism.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it increases Western acceptance of the struggle and legitimizes the Kurdish resistance.

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<sup>17</sup> Kendal Nezan, “Who are the Kurds?” Foundation Institut Kurde de Paris, accessed April 30, 2024. [https://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/who\\_are\\_the\\_kurds.php](https://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/who_are_the_kurds.php)

<sup>18</sup> Gourlay, “Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish solidarity,” 29.

<sup>19</sup> Democratic autonomy focuses on advocating for self-governance and self-determination at the local level through democratic processes. It embodies principles of direct democracy, gender equality, and cultural diversity, and it aims to offer more autonomy to local communities in economic, educational, and security matters while still being connected to a larger framework.

<sup>20</sup> TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy In North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, And Ecology-In Practice: A Reconnaissance Into Southeastern Turkey* (New Compass Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>21</sup> “Intra-Kurdish Interactions, Democratic Autonomy, and Peacebuilding in Rojava and Bakur,” Kurdish Peace Institute, last modified October 28, 2022, <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding/intra-kurdish-interactions-democratic-autonomy-and-peacebuilding-in-rojava-and-bakur/>; Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardeş, “Mimicry And Substitution In The Logic Of Sovereignty: The Case Of PYD,” *International Politics* 60, no. 1 (2023), 161.

*Legitimacy of Kurdish Self-Determination*

The legitimacy of the Kurdish movement is often associated with the benefit it has to the West. The fight against IS best highlights the pattern of weaponization of Kurdish self-determination by Western states. Western nations “understood that it did not matter whether these Kurdish fighters carried labels such as ‘terrorists’ ... – they were the only party stopping IS.”<sup>22</sup> Despite previously labeling these groups as “terrorist organizations” to primarily appease Turkey, the Western states were required to encourage Kurdish self-determination movements to ensure that their own nations were safe from IS. Thornton emphasizes that Western support in training and providing arms to the Kurds of the region strengthened self-determination movements following the fall of IS.<sup>23</sup> It was through this international lens that the Kurds were granted temporary support and motivation for self-determination.

As the phrase “no friends but the mountains” foreshadowed, Western support for Kurdish liberation ended when the Kurds were of no strategic benefit. The withdrawal of US powers jeopardized the dominance of the PYD, a major Kurdish armed group in Syria,<sup>24</sup> as they were reliant on protection and military support from the US. However, the betrayal of Western nations was simultaneously beneficial to Kurdish unity as it reinforced the significance of the *Kurdayeti*.<sup>25</sup> In the end, Kurdish liberation ideologies were strengthened by this inconsistent protection.

The lack of regular support for the Kurds underscores a balancing act: pushing for international “legitimacy” while simultaneously fighting an often violent battle for their freedoms. The majority of scholars acknowledge that the violence commonly associated with Kurdish movements stemmed from the oppression and violence they endured. Scholars concur that the lack of support for Kurdish civilians required them to look to militant, rebel groups for protection against groups like IS. For instance, Yeşiltaş and Kardaş argue that “the PYD...gained legitimacy due to its existential fight against ISIS.”<sup>26</sup> The violence of various Kurdish resistance groups impacts thousands of civilians, yet scholars additionally understand that the creation and reliance of such militant groups was due to the nuanced reality of the Kurds.

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<sup>22</sup> Rod Thornton, “Problems With The Kurds As Proxies Against Islamic State: Insights From The Siege Of Kobane,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 6 (2015): 873.

<sup>23</sup> Thornton, “Problems With The Kurds As Proxies Problems with the Kurds as proxies,” 874.

<sup>24</sup> Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, “Mimicry And Substitution,” 170.

<sup>25</sup> Gourlay, “Kurdayeti: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity,” 32.

<sup>26</sup> Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, “Mimicry and Substitution,” 168.

The violence associated with these resistance groups is often the primary aspect associated with the Kurds. For Syria, Iraq, Iranian, and Turkish governments, Kurds are often correlated with terrorism,<sup>27</sup> in part because of the threat these resistance groups pose to the existence of these nations. Internationally, the world also primarily hears of the Kurds in a negative light when violent instances occur. These events further the association of Kurds with terrorism and conflict.

However, the Kurdish movement is more complex than just violent militancy. To view the Kurdish movement more wholly, it must be situated in its true existence. The reality of the Kurdish people must be centered, rather than the violence that comes as a consequence of generations of oppression. To overcome the bonds of oppression and the negative perceptions placed on the Kurds, one must focus on the people. Centering culture can serve a pivotal role in humanizing the people; therefore, the Kurdish movement must be initially approached through the lens of Kurdish culture rather than politics or other perspectives to truly understand the people and their struggle.

### **III. Jin Jiyan Azadi: The Transnational Impacts of Kurdish Culture on Legitimizing Kurdish Movements**

Tracing the phrase *Jin Jiyan Azadi* (Women, Life, Freedom) and its growth in 2022 during the Jina Amini Protests can prove effective in analyzing the possibilities for how exposure to culture heightens understanding and legitimization of the Kurdish movement. The phrase originated in the late 20th century by the Kurdish Women's movement in response to persecution from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. It has strong connections to anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal movements and possesses deep roots in several core components of Kurdish culture: Women, Life, Freedom. The following portion of the paper will examine the extent to which the Kurdish people were humanized through the popularity of this phrase.

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<sup>27</sup> Lauren Walter, "Kurdistan's Language 'Problem'" (DePaul University, 2018), 20, <https://academics.depaul.edu/honors/curriculum/archives/Documents/2018%20Senior%20Theses/Walter.%20Kurdistan's%20Language%20Problem.pdf>; "Why Is Turkey Fighting Syria's Kurds?" *Foreign Policy*, 17, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/17/turkey-claim-syrian-kurds-terrorists-not-isis-ypg-pkk-sdf/>; Chris Zambelis, "The Factors Behind Rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 3 (2011).

*Women: Transnational Solidarity with the Kurdish Movement Through Kurdish Feminism*

The phrase *Jin Jiyan Azadi* starts with the word *Jin*, or woman, due to the significance of women in the Kurdish movement and culture. Kurdish culture is deeply intertwined with Kurdish femininity. Women are foundational to the Kurdish existence, as seen through the Kurdish concept of *Jineoloji*, a form of feminism deeply intertwined with Kurdish freedom movements since the early 2000s.<sup>28</sup> As the phrase *Jin Jiyan Azadi* began to gain traction due to the prejudicial and patriarchal systems in Iran that caused the murder of Jina Amini, Kurdish women were at the forefront. The discussions were centered on the female experience and identity, with Kurdish women voicing their intersectional experiences facing both ethnic and gender oppression. For many communities throughout the world, these discussions have been opportunities to understand the Kurdish people. The value of women in Kurdish culture was now a stark contrast against the oppressive measures of the Iranian government, both humanizing and legitimizing the Kurdish movement as something other than militant and terrorist.

Internationally, people began relating to the Kurds. Mexican women facing femicide found similarities between the Kurdish movement and their own. Figure 1, originally seen in the late 2010s, began to re-circulate on the internet, signifying solidarity with the Kurdish women and Kurdish people. Despite its simplicity, the graphic is powerful. On the right, the red flag has “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” written on it in Kurdish, and the green flag features the Spanish translation.

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<sup>28</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali and Isabel Käser, “Beyond Feminism? Jineoloji and the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement,” *Politics & Gender* 18, no. 1 (2022): 212–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000501>.





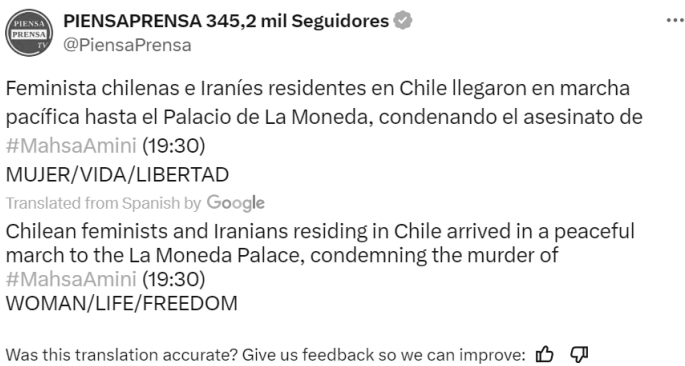
**Figure 1** *An art piece featuring “Women, Life, Freedom” written in Spanish (left) and Kurdish (right). Image of unknown origin.*

The art piece is filled with subtle facets that emphasize the unity of the Kurdish and Mexican people against their struggles. The fact that both of these women are drawn in the same way, sharing the red and green colors that adorn both the Kurdish and Mexican national flags, immediately highlights this connection. In both cultures, the red represents the bloodshed and martyrs who fought for their people’s freedom.<sup>29</sup> The green stripe on the Mexican flag represents hope and the fertility of the soil, and the green on the Kurdish flag represents the mountainous landscape of Kurdistan. Considering the phrase “no friends but the mountains,” the Kurdish landscape embodies the nature and hope of the Kurdish people. When faced with attacks from their neighbors and governments, Kurds have not only found refuge but perseverance thanks to the mountains. Having lived among Kurds in both Iraq and Turkey, Brenneman attests that, “When parents want to instill strength in their children, they merely point to the mountains and tell their children to be as strong as the mountains

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<sup>29</sup> “History of the Mexican Flag,” Stanford University, accessed April 30, 2024, [https://web.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/archives/syllabi/E\\_CLAD/SU\\_SFUSD\\_cult/fuller/History%20of%20Flag.htm](https://web.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/archives/syllabi/E_CLAD/SU_SFUSD_cult/fuller/History%20of%20Flag.htm); “The Day of the Flag of Kurdistan,” Kurdistan Regional Government, last modified December 17, 2017, [http://www.italy.gov.krd/17DIC\\_2017E.html](http://www.italy.gov.krd/17DIC_2017E.html).

are strong.”<sup>30</sup> For Kurds and Mexican people alike, hope and nature intertwine in their movements for freedom from oppression. The fact that these two women exist behind the backdrop of the sun underscores another cultural connection. For both cultures, the sun is associated with a revival, a rebirth of the people. The powerful depiction symbolizes a shared experience of sacrifice and the enduring quest for freedom that unites the Kurdish and Mexican cultures, and the resilience of Mexican and Kurdish women. The image symbolizes the shared struggles of women throughout, and as the slogan of “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” (or Mujer, Vida, Libertad) became more prevalent during the Jina Amini protests communities realized that their struggles were not so different. Women from Europe to the Americas, as seen in Figure 2, realized that they were not all that different in their struggles against oppression.



3:46 PM · Sep 23, 2022

**Figure 2** *Tweet from a Chilean Media Organization showing solidarity with the Kurdish protests in Iran.*

<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Brenneman, *As Strong As The Mountains: A Kurdish Cultural Journey* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2016), 69.

An additional layer of commonality between Kurdish and Latin American cultures is unveiled through the image of Mexican women standing in solidarity with the Kurdish women. Figure 3, featuring Mexican Oaxacan women holding a banner with the writing, “We embrace the fight of the Kurdish women. Jin Jiyān Azadi. Women weaving the Oaxacan community,” was seen in Latin American news following the Jina Amini protests.



**Figure 3** Protestors in Oaxaca, Mexico hold a banner in support of the women in Iran. Image of unknown origin; *The Kurdish Center For Studies* reports image to be dated to November, 2022.

This banner encapsulates the core of how culture can connect people and humanize the Kurdish cause. The Oaxaca region of Mexico consists of high rates of indigenous peoples,<sup>31</sup> each with their own complex history. This history of assimilation, resistance, and oppression connects the people of Oaxaca to the Kurdish struggle.

Like Figures 1 and 2, this banner centers the women within their respective cultures. The Kurds and Oaxacans not only found unity in their shared struggles for cultural rights but also in the foundational role played by feminist movements within their overarching movements to preserve and fight for their indigenous cultures.<sup>32</sup> *Jin Jiyān Azadi* was placed near *Mujeres Tejiendo Comunidad Oaxaca*, the Oaxacan feminist movement. The phrase traces back to the indigenous women of Oaxaca who preserve their traditional weaving practices while working to foster Oaxacan autonomy.

<sup>31</sup> "Supporting the Reform Agenda for Inclusive Growth in Oaxaca, Mexico," World Bank, last modified September 4, 2013, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/09/04/oaxaca-inclusive-growth>.

<sup>32</sup> Yanna Yannakakis, *The Art Of Being In-Between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, And Local Rule In Colonial Oaxaca* (Duke University Press, 2008), X.

The Oaxacan people were able to see their own cultural struggle in the Kurdish movement, and it was the Jina Amini protests that pushed the phrase “Jin Jiyan Azadi” into the global view that these groups were able to stand together in solidarity.

*Life: International Recognition of Jina Amini Protests Creates New Recognition for the Kurdish People*

The humanization of the Kurds and the Kurdish struggle offered an opportunity for international acceptance of and solidarity with the Kurdish people. Popular international media shared Kurdish realities with the public, and Kurdish social media accounts gained greater reach to further humanize and show the Kurdish experience. As Jina Amini grew more well-known in international media, #MahsaAmini and the Persian equivalent of مهسا\_امینی# reached over 100 million tweets (as of 2022) according to the Iran International English Twitter. The Kurdish phrase of “Jin Jiyan Azadi” began to gain popularity simultaneously, often seen in protests such as in Figures 2 and 3. However, this phrase primarily broke the international media in its Farsi translation, “Zan Zendegi Azadi,”<sup>33</sup> with famous brands such as Balenciaga and Gucci posting the Farsi translation.

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<sup>33</sup> “Iran’s protesters find inspiration in a Kurdish revolutionary slogan,” *NPR*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/27/1131436766/kurdish-roots-iran-protest-slogan>.



**Figure 4** Social media posts from Gucci (left) and Balenciaga (right) featuring the English and Farsi translations of the Kurdish phrase, “Jin Jiyan Azadi.”

The lack of usage of the original Kurdish phrase omits the crucial context of the intersectional nature of Jina Amini’s death. By primarily using the Farsi or English translations, the history of Kurdish oppression in Iran (including the forced assimilation into Persian culture and language)<sup>34</sup> was lost. The protests became centered solely against the Iranian morality police, without much regard for the important secondary layer of anti-Kurdish sentiment. Adamant about ensuring that the Kurdish history and culture behind the phrase was recognized by all, Kurdish organizations and figures joined Western media to highlight the roots of this phrase and the Jina Amini protests.

In light of the initial international protests ignoring Jina Amini’s Kurdish background, Jiyani Zandi, a Kurdish woman, submitted “Why It’s Vital to Center Kurdish Voices in the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Movement,” to *Time Magazine*. The piece urged the international community to not leave the Kurdish people behind as the phrase gained popularity. Zandi shared crucial context on “Jin Jiyan Azadi” not just as a symbol of resistance but rather as a representation of the cultural importance of the

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad Mohammadpour and Kamal Soleimani, “Minoritisation Of The Other: The Iranian Ethno-Theocratic State’s Assimilatory Strategies,” *Postcolonial Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 56.

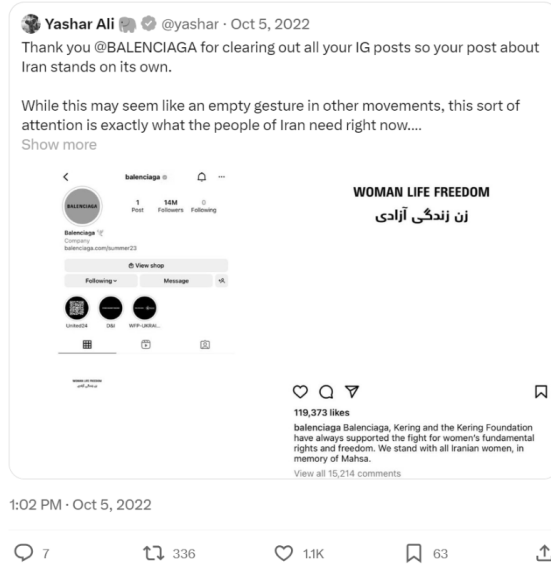
labor carried out by Kurdish women throughout history. The fact that many of these widespread articles included discussions of the Kurdish struggle to the average audience was incredibly significant. Society was open to Kurdish voices due to the immediacy of the situation, and therefore, articles that further detailed the Kurdish struggle were read and understood by many. Jina Amini's story, and therefore the story of the Kurdish people, was told on *AP News*, *NBC News*, *Time Magazine*, *PBS*, *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, the *New York Times*, and a number of human rights organizations.<sup>35</sup> As Kurds corroborated news outlets with further context, the Kurdish experience was humanized and understood globally.

A similar phenomenon happened throughout social media. Popular activist accounts began reposting Kurdish posts which shared the nuances behind the phrase that gained international awareness. For instance, after Balenciaga had posted a post with Jin, Jiyan, Azadi written in English and Farsi, a Kurd retweeted the post with her personal thoughts.

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<sup>35</sup> "Iran's protesters find inspiration in a Kurdish revolutionary slogan," *NPR*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/27/1131436766/kurdish-roots-iran-protest-slogan>; "Iranians protest in capital over woman's death in custody," *AP News*, September 19, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-arrests-tehran-56c37c03a96701de7043e127f0eda279>; Hyder Abbasi, "Mahsa Amini did not die from blows to body, Iranian coroner says amid widespread protests," *NBC News*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/mahsa-amini-death-iran-morality-police-protests-coroner-report-rcna51169>; Jiyan Zandi, "Why It's Vital to Center Kurdish Voices in the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement," *Time Magazine*, November 23, 2022, <https://time.com/6236067/mahsa-amini-jina-iran-kurdish-identity/>; "Voices of women inside and outside Iran on the uprising after Mahsa Amini's death," *PBS NewsHour*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/voices-of-women-inside-and-outside-iran-on-the-uprising-after-mahsa-amini-death>; "Mahsa Amini: How one woman's death sparked Iran protests," *BBC*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/63132235>; Yusra Farzan, "'Terrifying and inspiring': Iranian Americans on the protests rocking Iran," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/30/mahsa-amini-iran-protests-terrifying-inspiring-iranian-american>; "Young Iranians are rising up against decades of repression – arguably bolder than ever," *CNN*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/24/middleeast/mahsa-amini-death-iran-internet-un-investigation-intl-hnk/index.html>; Farnaz Fassihi, "In Iran, Woman's Death After Arrest by the Morality Police Triggers Outrage," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/middleeast/iran-death-woman-protests.html>.

The phrase “Jin Jiyan Azadi” was born from a Kurdish guerrilla group that is inherently anti-capitalist, and pro-egalitarian. Now we see famous brands co-opting the phrase and translating it to Farsi with no regard to its Kurdish/ideological inception.



**Figure 5** Tweet from Kurdish source, *Narîn* | نارین (@narinology), reaching 1.1k likes discussing the meaning of “Jin Jiyan Azadi.”

Following the initial retweet, the Kurdish woman provided additional context in the comments. The retweet received over 1.1k likes, and it was one of many that circulated on Instagram and Twitter. This individual, in particular, also intentionally responded to tweets that only used the Farsi translation of the Kurdish phrase, such as Malala Yousafzai’s post or Balenciaga’s. It was through these major online platforms that non-Kurdish people were gaining information about the Jina Amini protests. Through Kurds’ efforts to provide context and address the nuances of these protests by responding to these popular posts, they were able to reach a larger audience.

As with the article in *Time Magazine*, these Kurdish social media posts gained popularity and acceptance due to their relevance. If people were supporting Iranian rights, it would be illogical for them to dismiss Kurdish rights. Therefore, more people were open to listening to Kurdish voices sharing their history. Knowledge of the Kurdish people was then spread globally, in large part due to the popularity of Jin, Jiyan, Azadi.

*Freedom: Kurdish Culture as an Element for Kurdish Liberation*

Perhaps a central aspect of culture in humanizing the Kurdish movement is its ability to mobilize people. Action is what is ultimately necessary for those under oppression, while humanization is the intermediary step. In the Jina Amini protests, Kurdish culture was used as a catalyst to push society to listen to, and then support, the Kurdish movement as a whole. The movement was seen as a struggle of people against oppression not so different from oppression in any other location. Having found a connection with the Kurds through cultural elements, such as the value Kurds place on women, communities globally were now linked with the Kurdish movement. They were motivated to support the Kurdish people in their fight for freedom.

As the international community rallied behind the Kurdish movement, the Kurdish community themselves became more empowered. Kurds flocked to the streets of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria in their cultural attire, singing Kurdish songs and chanting Kurdish phrases in protest for Jina Amini and the Kurdish people. These expressions were once forbidden in several of the Kurdish home nations, and in some places, they remain banned.<sup>36</sup> Yet the push for Kurdish empowerment was able to overcome these immediate threats of arrest or extreme violence. The Kurds were able to reclaim their culture and use it as a method to fight for their freedom alongside support from the international community.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The world can be changed through the expression and exposure of culture. By sharing their culture, Kurds can develop bonds with communities outside their own—a critical step in addressing Kurdish oppression. Despite the Jina Amini protests dying down, and international support slowly fading, the exposure of Kurdish culture was not fruitless. The global community was introduced to the Kurdish struggle in a manner that did not portray the Kurds in a negative light. Society was able to humanize and connect with the Kurds as people. Despite international fervor for Kurdish liberation dwindling, the interactions between the international society and the Kurds continue. According to women's rights activist Sussan Tahmasebi, feminist

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<sup>36</sup> Farangis Ghaderi, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi and the Historical Erasure of Kurds," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 4 (2023): 718, 721-722. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382300137X>; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "The Cultural Situation of the Kurds," Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, (July 2006).



movements in the Middle East have continued engaging with Iranian feminists to learn about their struggles.<sup>37</sup>

Progress comes in small steps. Gradual societal exposure to the Kurdish struggle is required if one hopes to increase Western support for the Kurdish people despite current hesitations. As more Middle Eastern feminist movements engage with feminist movements in Iran, there is a greater possibility for further international engagement, including with Western communities. Although Syrian Kurds continue to be bombed, Turkish Kurds continue to be censored, Iranian Kurds continue to be jailed, and Iraqi Kurds continue to be repressed, the international world is one step closer to acknowledging and fighting for Kurdish human rights. The solidarity seen during the Jina Amini protests increased international support for the Kurds through the feminist movements that connect Kurdish culture with the global community, and it is through the feminism that is deeply intertwined with Kurdish culture that the Kurds can continue reaching the international world years after the initial protests of Jina Amini first began.

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<sup>37</sup> "The Regional Impact of Iran's Protests, One Year Later: A Democracy in Exile Roundtable," DAWN, 18, 2023, <https://dawnmena.org/the-regional-impact-of-irans-protests-one-year-later-a-democracy-in-exile-roundtable/>.