



Armita Abbasi's Instagram photo shows her smiling and defiant, without a hijab – and sporting a Star of David around her neck. Shortly after posting the picture, Abbasi became the latest demonstrator to be abducted by the Iranian authorities following the recent protests across Iran. But **Elham Gheytauchi**, who grew up under the shadow of the Iranian regime, says today's protestors will not be deterred

The world is witnessing a women-led mass protest in Iran. For the past two months, demonstrators have been chanting “Death to the dictator”, calling for an end to the Islamic Republic of Iran and, in some cases, burning their mandatory hijabs. For those of us who grew up in Iran in the 1980s, the images we are seeing feel surreal.

When I was in 8th grade, I attended the Jewish school, Ettefagh in Tehran, where my mother had once been principal. It was also open to students of all faiths and, by 1985, it was run by an all-Muslim staff. I was harassed daily by the new principal for the way I dressed and not obeying the rules for “proper hijab”. Of course, I was wearing a manteau, trousers and full hijab, but what bothered this principal were my eyelashes, which are naturally thick. I will never forget the first time

she stopped me and demanded that I wipe off my mascara. I told her I did not wear mascara. She took a handkerchief from her pocket, spat on it, then ordered me to wipe my eyes with it. This harassment went on for a year and every time I objected, she threatened to hand me over to the Ershad or ‘morality police’ who would have taken me to prison. Neither then, nor since, have I bought or used mascara.

At home, my parents urged my siblings and me to be complacent and never object to the authorities. We were afraid of how violent the Islamic Republic could become, especially when they found out we were Jewish. Before the revolution in 1979, Iran's Jewish community was the biggest outside of Israel. Its number has now diminished to just 10,000. I internalised not being public about my Jewish identity. In Iran, young women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds have been taught to be complacent and obey the

regulations relating to the hijab.

Something has changed, however, in today's younger generation. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, they are digital natives and, despite the government's efforts to censor the internet, the youth have always found a way to circumvent state censorship. Iranian women comprise 60 percent of university graduates, and young people – especially young women – are tired of the humiliation their mothers had to endure. Women from Muslim, secular, ethnic and religious minority backgrounds are demanding autonomy and basic human rights. They want their testimonies in court to be counted as equal to – not half of – that of a man; the legal age of marriage to be raised from 13; unfair inheritance laws based on gender to be thrown out and gender equality to be enforced in the workforce.

“The principal took out a handkerchief, spat on it, then ordered me to wipe my eyes with it”



Mahsa Amini, also known as Jina Amini, was one such young woman, a 22-year-old who was visiting Tehran from the Iranian Kurdistan area. Her death at the hands of the ‘morality police’ on 16 September last year sparked the nationwide protests we have been seeing. Mahsa was a Kurdish-Iranian woman and part of an ethnic group who, like other religious and ethnic minorities, are not always given full rights and freedoms. But in a theocratic regime, women at large are a minority whose rights are violated on daily basis.

Since the revolution of 1979, Iran has seen periodic social unrest, most notably the green movement in 2009, which protested the re-election of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But this recent wave of protests is different in scope, scale and content. Protestors continue to chant “Women, life, freedom” as they face multiple rows of violent, state-backed forces intent on stopping the demonstrators, even if that involves shooting and killing them. The police, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (or Sepah), the Basij Resistance Force (a paramilitary group), as well as the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's special forces (who are plain-clothed), are engaged in one of the most brutal crackdowns in the history of the regime. So far 506 have been killed, including 69 children. The protests and strikes of workers only grow as more people around the world boycott Iranian products.

Khamenei has called the demonstrators “agents of the US and Israel”. This claim, however, will be harder to maintain as the protests grow. It will also be harder to know about the real identity of the victims, because their families are under duress by the state to deny that their loved ones were killed by the armed forces. In some cases, the families are even forced to make TV confessions if they want to collect the bodies of their loved ones for burial. The authorities threaten to kill other family members if they do not cooperate.

A few weeks ago, an image of a young woman named Armita Abbasi surfaced on social media (left). She is a 20-year-old who was abducted by IRGC, raped and then transferred to a hospital for a few hours without her family being able to see her. Abbasi is currently being held in the notorious Fardis prison in Karaj, just west of Tehran, according to the Iranian government.

Armita looks beautiful and energetic in her online images and I cannot stop thinking about her Star of David necklace. Is she Jewish? We may never know. ■

Elham Gheytauchi is a sociologist teaching at California's Santa Monica College, USA. She has written for CNN and Huffington Post. Elham and Dora Levy Mossanen (see right) will be speaking at our online Iran event on 8 March. See listings p62.

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LOVE AND WAR IN THE JEWISH QUARTER BY DORA LEVY MOSSANEN

Reviewed by **Jennifer Langer**

It is unlikely many Iranian Jewish women are involved in the ongoing protests in Iran. Historically they have been silent and invisible and there has always been an almost total absence of literature by Jewish women in Iran because it endangered the community. But in exile there has been an explosion of these women's voices. Writers such as Farideh Goldin, Gina Nahai, Roya Hakakian, Dalia Sofer, Mojgan Kahen and Dora Levy Mossanen, who all fled from Iran following the revolution in 1979, have spoken out, making Iranian Jewish women visible for the first time and exploring their experience through novels and memoirs.

Love and War in the Jewish Quarter is Mossanen's latest thrilling historical novel. It is set in the 1940s, when World War II is raging and Iran has been invaded by the Allies. Adept at creating contrasts between the opulent interiors of powerful rulers and the decaying Jewish quarter, the author provides us with vivid insights into the two worlds. Demonised by the majority Shi'a Muslims, who believe Jews are impure, the Jewish community experiences perpetual trauma, always fearful of pogroms by the Muslims, yet continuing to celebrate their traditions. In the Tehran ghetto we meet an extraordinary cast of characters, including the Jewish protagonist, Dr Yaran, a renowned dentist.

One day the doctor is summoned to the royal palace to treat the queen of Iran and is then ordered to administer to the ruthless governor general, who despises Jews but insists on being treated by Dr Yaran because of his innovative treatments. When the dentist's wife Ruby dies in

childbirth, the Jewish community's expectation is that he will marry a Jewish woman, who will be a mother to his daughter Neda. However, the dentist falls deeply in love with Velvet, the governor general's unhappy young wife – and a Muslim. This is a secret Dr Yaran must closely guard because the relationship endangers himself, his daughter and the entire Jewish community. Will he marry her? Meanwhile our protagonist worries about his daughter, whose eyes have stopped producing tears and who is being cared for by superstitious aunt Shamsie. He finally realises that Neda's acute attachment to her dolls, her imaginary friend in the mushroom patch, her concern for her father's happiness and the problem with her eyes might all originate from the absence of a mother in her life.

Set against this compelling story of love and community there is also the issue of the ‘Tehran children’, the true story of the Polish Jewish orphans during World War II, who found temporary refuge in the Soviet Union following Hitler's invasion of Poland and were then evacuated to Tehran. With his connections in high places, the dentist is enlisted to secure their safe passage to Palestine.

With Mossanen's rich prose replete with imaginative imagery, Farsi phrases and a scattering of mystical love poetry and magical realism, the narrative urges the reader ever forward in an enjoyable tale that also throws light on a disappeared world. ■

Love and War in the Jewish Quarter by Dora Levy Mossanen, Post Hill Press, 2022, £25. Dr Jennifer Langer is founding director of Exiled Writers Ink. Her debut poetry collection is The Search, Victorina Press, 2021.