



Escape from Iran: 'My dream was to be a primary teacher. Now I'm holding a gun'



Lorraine Mallinder
in Iraqi Kurdistan

After taking part in protests, Rezan (19) was targeted by Iran's security forces

High up in the dusty mountains of Iraq's Kurdistan region, Rezan sits pensively, face hidden by a scarf revealing only her watchful eyes, hand on the wooden stock of her Kalashnikov. Only a few weeks ago, she would never have imagined herself with a lethal weapon.

"My dream was to become a primary teacher. Now I'm holding a gun," she says.

Less than a month ago, this 19-year-old, whose name has been changed for security reasons, fled Iran. She was smuggled over the Hawraman

mountains, trudging over the muddy terrain for three days with other fugitives, everyone "shaking and shivering" with cold and fear. Reaching Iraqi Kurdistan, she joined a group of female Iranian Kurdish freedom fighters in their remote mountain hideout.

Originally from the town of Sanandaj in Iran's Kurdish region, Rezan had joined the nationwide wave of protests sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa "Zhin" Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman arrested by morality police for, in their estimation, wearing her hijab improperly. The authorities claimed she died of a heart attack. Her family alleged she had been beaten by police.

The wave of outrage that followed has been especially strong in Iran's Kurdish region, where people have long felt targeted by the Islamic Republic's brutally applied laws restricting cultural expression. "I cannot describe how humiliated my family felt that this girl was being used as an example for Iran," says Rezan. "They were saying: If you have a loose hijab, this will be your fate."

It had hurt her, she says, to see "Zhin", as she is called by her fellow Kurds, come back a corpse. She had no doubts

about taking to the streets. "I didn't fear because we did it collectively ... From the minute we started, we all had one question: are you in or out?"

She recalls being in the crowd, pushing forwards as the security forces fired birdshot into the front rows. "That would only make us angrier, and we would push harder," she says. At one point, amid all the confusion, the screaming and the tear gas, she says she was seized by the hair by a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). But protesters rallied around her, shielding her from arrest.

Rumours spread

But the net was closing on her. After she joined protests in the neighbourhood of Sharif Awa in Sanandaj, rumours spread that large numbers had been identified by regime cameras. To stay meant inevitable capture by the IRGC. Her parents already had connections with PAK, the Kurdistan Freedom Party, which has been fighting for a homeland for all Kurds since the early 90s. They also knew a smuggler who could help her flee over the border to join PAK's female regiment.

Within days, her mind was made up. "My parents found



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the solution because they knew they would lose me either way. For me to be safe from the IRGC, I had to come here. I

didn't take the risk. I decided to leave."

There was little time to prepare. Her mother packed some biscuits and juice for the dangerous three-day trek. Rain had come early to the mountains and the group had to keep stopping to empty the mud from their shoes. Arriving at last in Erbil, she stayed six days with the family of the smuggler, who then took her to join PAK in the mountains.

Was she scared?

'You are always scared'

Her response is adamant. "Believe me, nothing could be scarier than the place I came from. When these wolves are following you, you are always scared," she says. In the camp, she says she has found a spirit of camaraderie among women of all ages, with similar experiences of fleeing Iran. In the short time since she joined, she has also received something of a crash course in Iranian Kurdish history and culture.

At home, she was not interested in politics. In her spare time, she would pack a picnic and go trekking in the mountains near Sanandaj. She loved nothing more than an afternoon at the town's local bazaar with her mum and

■ Rezan, from Sanandaj in Iranian Kurdistan fled over the border on September 28th, fearing identification on surveillance cameras after participating in protests.
PHOTOGRAPH: LORRAINE MALLINDER

sister, where she would splurge on sweets. "That's all I'd buy," she says, laughing.

But, unable to afford university, her dreams of becoming a teacher were fading fast. "They kill your dreams in Iran. Even if you study, you can't find employment," she says. "Then you sit at home and think of creating a family, but you can't find a good person because so many young people are addicted to drugs."

She strikes an amateurish pose with her Kalashnikov, holding it far apart from her body, as if afraid of its potential impact. One of the more experienced hands approaches her, firmly takes her arm, raises the rifle to eye level, shows her how to take aim, finger poised on the trigger.

"I feel very safe holding this gun. I know I can protect myself on my own now," says Rezan, her tone resolute.

"I didn't choose to leave, but I had to."