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REPORT

IRAN PROTESTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH IRANIAN ACTIVIST SANA EBRAHIMI

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NOVEMBER 2022



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Background:

In September 2022, the so-called morality police in Iran murdered a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini for not fully abiding by the regime's outdated and oppressive modesty laws. The mullah regime had no idea this would result in [nationwide protests](#) against their backwards and brutal tyranny. The people of Iran are no longer willing to tolerate the oppressive mullah regime and are calling for a change in leadership. These nationwide protests are a manifestation of the people's desire for freedom and democracy; as part of this, Iranians are taking down pro-Palestine signs, [vandalising regime statues and posters](#), and knocking off the turbans of regime mullahs.

The world is watching closely to see how the situation unfolds, and it remains to be seen what the outcome of these historic protests will be.

As part of our commitment to raising awareness of the protests by the brave Iranian people, Midstone Centre interviewed Chicago-based Iranian human rights activist Sana Ebrahimi for her thoughts on the protests.

First of all, it's a pleasure to have this session with you and thank you for your time. Please give a brief introduction of yourself for our readers.

Thank you for giving me this chance to speak and try to raise awareness. I am Sana Ebrahimi, a second-year PhD student in Computer Science at the University of Illinois Chicago. I was born and raised in Tehran, Iran. After getting my bachelor's degree from Sharif University in 2019, I moved to the US to pursue my graduate studies in Computer Science.

How did you become involved in activism and why are you so passionate about the ongoing protests in Iran?

My family, especially my father, has always been very involved and interested in politics. Growing up he would always talk about his political activism in the early 1980s. My grandfather was also an activist before and during the revolution. I remember from an early age as soon after I learnt to read maybe 10 or 11 I started reading my dad's books. He had a big bookshelf that was full of books about politics, history and religion. Since then I became very aware of the political situation in Iran and would actively follow the news and read about the political history of Iran, especially after the revolution. As I grew older I was feeling the pressure more and more every day. When I became an adult, I could see how I was losing my basic rights and freedom as a woman and as a human. I could feel the financial pressure caused by the economy and my parents' struggles in day-to-day life. Eventually, I moved to the US for a brighter future and to have the rights that were taken away from me in my home country. I have very strong emotional ties with my country and its people. As someone who lived most of her life in that country, witnessed and experienced the struggles daily, I feel so close to the youth fighting on the streets in Iran every day and I want to fight along with my people for my country and its freedom.



Could you summarize the general ambitions of those involved in the protests, what are their real objectives? And do you believe that these objectives can be achieved through non-violent means?

The ongoing fight in Iran is the result of years of oppression and destruction by the government. I have seen protests in the past. This is not a protest, it is a revolution. People do not want to be dehumanized and oppressed anymore. They have been trying to ask for their basic human rights for years but were always treated with unforgiving force. Now they are demanding that this Islamic government be abolished. The regime has destroyed the country in every aspect and has no mercy towards its citizens. People have not had the right to speak up against the regime for 44 years. There is no freedom in any way. While poverty is up to the roof and people can not simply afford their daily life, the government officials are extremely wealthy and corrupt and the financial gap is significant. I think it's important to mention, Iran is one of the richest countries, not just for our oil and gas but also for the various mines across Iran all of which are at the hands of the supreme leader per the constitution and civilians don't see a dime of that in their economy. Freedom fighters in Iran want to take their country back, build it and make it a home again. Unfortunately what we are witnessing is a real genocide in Iran. The IRGC forces are using firearms on the streets of Iran. They even attack high schools and universities to stop people from protesting and spread fear. Over 50 children have been shot dead by the regime forces since the beginning of the recent movements. Unfortunately, the government has already started the violence by using weapons and bullets against unarmed people, and they must fight back in self-defence. Since November 2019 there are at least 2 recorded instances where the Islamic regime has used DShk which is a heavy war weapon to commit mass murders in Mahshahr and Mahabad.

How do you see these protests in the historical context of Iran? Do you think the protesters have a shot this time? And if yes, do you think these protests are more likely to lead to a collapse of the regime or are reforms more likely?

This is the biggest anti-regime movement in the history of Iran after the revolution. I believe people are going to win this time because they have never been this united since the revolution in 1979. The protests in the past in which the majority of people were calling for reform like the 2009 "green movement" were shut down by the government using massive violence. The major difference this time is that people are not afraid of risking their lives and face the absolute brutality of the regime to win this battle and topple the regime. They want nothing but regime change. This call for regime change has been silenced in the international community for years. This was mainly the case because, since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, the government made concerted efforts to train and grow its propaganda machine in North America and Europe. One of their most infamous efforts was to spread the big lie that Iranian people are only asking for reforms due to financial hardship which exists as a result of western sanctions. Iranian people have never protested for the sole reason of poverty or financial hardship. Even during the worst sanctions, the regime always had enough money to incite war in the region and fund foreign operations.

How do you see the increased participation of young women in these protests? And what do you say to those who say that this is a feminist revolution which doesn't necessarily need men?

Throughout the history of Iran, women have always been progressive even under the massive amount of oppression during the Islamic regime. As we are witnessing the uprising of women around the world, women in Iran, one of the most oppressed groups since day one of the revolution, are demanding their rights. The compulsory hijab was a tool to control and dehumanize women and that is a representation of what the oppressive regime has been doing to every human regardless of their gender in Iran. Once women take the lead, there are going to be their fathers, brothers, friends and

eventually the entire community behind them and fighting with them. Therefore being a feminist movement does not mean that we do not need men. It all comes down to being a human and fighting for human rights. The beauty of this revolution is that men are fighting shoulder to shoulder with women shouting “Women, Life, Freedom”.

Some regime leaders have called for stricter actions against the protesters. Do you think the Iran regime can become more violent towards the protesters in the coming weeks?

According to what we have known of this government, they are capable of doing even worse. The regime has a history of massive murders and immense violence against Iranians. In the bloody November of 2019, the first time the government completely shut down the internet, they committed mass killings. There is still no exact record of the number of people killed during the internet blackout. The world's attention is what has stopped them from doing the worst so far. This level of violence by the regime also predates the internet age. The regime has killed many civilians for made-up reasons. One of the most significant cases was the execution of Farzad Kamangar who got his death sentence in a 7-minute trial, the judge confessed his awareness regarding Farzad's innocence, but even he, the judge, was being pressured to give out the death sentence!

Note that even when we are saying the worst has not come out yet, the IRGC forces shoot people in the streets, kill children, arrest in large numbers, torture and dehumanize people in the prison, rape girls in daylight, kidnap people, harvest their bodies and steal their organs and will not even return their lifeless bodies to their family!

Therefore, the world should be so alarmed about “the worst” which could happen.

What do you think about the protests in Baluchistan? Would you agree that the regime's crackdown in Baluchistan has been more violent than in other places? If so, why do you think that is?

The regime has always been brutal with minority and ethnic groups in Iran. They are oppressed and voiceless. Baluch people are an ethnic group that has always been overlooked by the government intentionally. They lack the simplest living situation such as clean water or school let alone the internet and media that could amplify and be their voice during a crisis. They opened fire from helicopters at people while they were praying defenselessly. We still have no accurate statistics on how many people have been killed so far. Some families had to take the body of their loved ones home secretly and bury them in their yards only to not let the government steal their bodies and not give them back.

The genocide against this ethnic group is horrific. Khodanour Lajae, a Baluch who was shot by the forces has now become a symbol of this brutality. Khodanour did not even have government-issued IDs which is very common among people in Baluchistan because the regime uses this tactic as a tool to oppress the most vulnerable. The photo shows Khodanour tied to a pole a couple of months before his death. The police were bribed to arrest him because he had an argument with a government agent and they thought he needed to be taught a lesson. He was thirsty and when he asked for water, they put water in front of him at a distance that he could only look towards. They treated him the same on the day he was shot and withheld medical help until he had lost so much blood he could not be saved. This shows the merciless and inhuman nature of the regime.

What do you think about the demands of some Kurdish and Baloch citizens of Iran? Some of them talk about their own ethnic identity over the Iranian identity and some voices call for a separate Kurdistan and a separate Baluchistan. What is your opinion about those voices?

Unfortunately, these are stories that have been made up by the regime for years to justify their brutality against these ethnic groups and are spread by the Iran lobby and regime apologists outside of borders to legitimize using force against people. When Baloch people were raised in support of a Kurdish girl (Mahsa Amini) who was brutally murdered by the regime, their slogan was “From Balochistan to Kurdistan, I give my life for Iran”. Right after the mass killing of Balochistan, Kurdish people came to the streets and chanted “From Kurdistan to Balochistan, I give my life for Iran”. People of every ethnic group and part of Iran are all united against their one enemy, the Islamic regime. Everyone is fighting for the freedom of Iran and nothing else.

How do you see the regime’s attitude and behaviour towards the Iranian Sunnis?

As mentioned ethnic groups and minorities in Iran have always been discriminated against. Even in the education system, they brainwash children against Sunnis and Jews to the point that by the end of our education and before being mature enough to receive information from anywhere outside of school, we have a different image of how these groups of people look like as human beings!

Sanandaj, the birth town of Mahsa Amini, is majority populated by Sunnis and they have also been a target of the IRGC forces to massively kill and oppress people. Again, there is no accurate record of the number of people killed or arrested by the regime in those areas.

As we know, you have been very critical of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) on your social media feed. How do you see NIAC and their role in the Iranian American community?

Since the beginning, NIAC has always been shutting down the true voice of Iranians who demand life and freedom. They have gained a massive amount of influence and power in media and politics and using that has painted a completely different picture of Iran and our demands in the interest of the Islamic regime. While getting funded massively by democrats and far-left foundations in the US, they blame the US sanctions for every human crisis in Iran to push for the nuclear deal (JCPOA). Their most recent attempt has been showing that this movement is against the mandatory hijab and financial crisis caused by the sanctions, not the entirety of the regime and amplifies the lie that there is a risk of separation by ethnic groups in Iran after overthrowing the regime. Moreover, they have very questionable financial backgrounds and transactions. According to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund website, NIAC received 75K\$ in February 2022 to help Iran with covid vaccines while Khamenei banned the import of covid vaccines from the US and UK in January 2021. To this day they have not provided any answer to what they have done with this fund. Ahmad Shams, one of the relatives of Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, is one of their board members who has multiple lawsuits against him. They also once lost a defamation lawsuit in which they could not prove that they are not agents of the Islamic regime.

Do you think that NIAC has been too defensive about the regime in the past and do you think there’s any hope for a change in their narrative after these protests in Iran?

Yes, absolutely. As someone who lived most of her life in Iran, I can certainly say that their message has always been aligned with the regime's propaganda. They have whitewashed the brutality of the regime and its crimes against humanity, misreported the number of people killed by the regime in bloody November of 2019, denied multiple terrorist incidents such as the shooting down of Ukraine

International Airlines Flight 752 by IRGC and normalized and misrepresented the reality of compulsory hijab and its laws in Iran. After the alleged bomb threat at The University of Chicago first claimed by Negar Mortazavi, one of the regime apologists who has an affiliation with NIAC, was proved to be a lie, the Iranian diaspora started to pressure them more than before. Having the spotlight on them made them slowly change their narrative from reform to standing by the people of Iran and renouncing the regime. However, they will never be trusted inside and outside of Iran.

If the regime of Ayatollah Khamenei collapses, what is your idea for a new government? Do you think it would be a monarchy or a democracy or something else, and how smoothly could this new government be set up?

I think that the majority have agreed upon a secular government that has no involvement with any specific religion. That is in my opinion a key point of this revolution and is foreseeable for a future government. The Pahlavi family is supported by a large group of Iranians who want monarchy inside and outside of Iran. However, Reza Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's son, the prince of Iran, in his most recent speech has publicly announced that he does not want to become a king, does not see a monarchy for the future of Iran and only demands freedom and peace for the people to be able to choose their government. Democratic government is also something that is supported by a big group of Iranians. While I respect and appreciate the Pahlavi family, I think a kingdom is an outdated form of government and we need to go beyond that in our fight. The challenges during the transition are inevitable, but people are familiar with them. The desire for freedom is what has brought everyone together and we are hoping to see a coalition of the leaders of the opposition that supports a free referendum for people to decide what they want. Also, we believe that regime change would open a door to many Iranian experts and intellectuals in every field who either had to leave the country or have been jailed for years to make this transition smooth.

What do you think about the MEK and the Pahlavis? How much support do you think they have inside Iran? Please address both individually.

Primarily MEK was an Islamist radical left group which was founded before the Islamic revolution in opposition to Pahlavi's family and its kingdom. Soon they engaged in armed conflicts and operations against Pahlavi. At some point, Islamists, democrats and republicans came together and started to fight against their common enemy, Pahlavi. Not long after the revolution, when Khomeini did not let MEK members run for the office and eliminated other groups to gain power, they raised against the Islamic Republic and took a different path which led to targeting government officials, terrorist attacks and organizing protests against the Islamic republic. Eventually, the government massively executed a large number of their members and sympathizers mostly without holding a court. During that time, even keeping a MEK poster or having their books count as being an MEK sympathizer. This led to the execution of many teenagers and young adults.

During the Iran-Iraq war, as an attempt against the Islamic Republic, MEK started an alliance with Iraq and brutally killed hundreds of thousands of innocent Iranians. By that time MEK which was more like a cult now was known as a terrorist organization by Iran. While the people of Iran strongly condemn the horrific execution of thousands of people under the name of "MEK members and supporters" by the government, MEK is the most hated organization by a very large majority of Iranians around the world to this day. They have a very small group of supporters who are mostly located outside of Iran. At best, they are still a boogie man for the regime to silence their opposition in the diaspora which usually fails fast.

During Pahlavi's kingdom, Iran was growing and flourishing in many aspects. After the overthrow of

the Qajar dynasty, Reza Shah took the title of Shah and made one of the strongest armies in the history of Iran. Significant growth in the education system, economy, military, and foreign affairs is Pahlavi's accomplishment after the dark history of Qajar. During Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's kingdom, Iran became the biggest power in the region and had significant economic growth. During this time Iran experienced the longest period of sustained growth in per capita real income the Iranian economy ever experienced and saw its largest-ever GDP uptick. Of course, there might have been shortcomings and nothing is 100% perfect in every aspect, but Pahlavi's accomplishments and services to Iran and Iranians have made them probably one of the most supported and favourable past governments in the contemporary history of Iran. Currently, Pahlavi supporters are a big group of opposition inside and outside of Iran. While this does not necessarily mean people would want a monarchy for their future government, it shows that Pahlavi is one of the candidates for Iranians.

Do you think a new government in Iran would be friendly towards Israel and the U.S.?

I think experiencing the consequences of years of unnecessary fights against Israel and the US which happened because the regime wanted to expand its influence in the region, the people of Iran would want nothing but peace and agreements that leads to our economic growth building up what the Islamic regime has destroyed. This is what we are hoping for in the future and could bring peace to the world. This is one of the main reasons that every government in the world should support this revolution and recognize it.

What would you say to those who say that if the present regime collapses, it will create a power vacuum and there are no good options available to fill in that vacuum?

The regime in Iran by itself is the main source of aggression and problems in the region. They support terrorist groups which would never survive or even exist without the support of the IRGC. Iran has a different situation from Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. If there is going to be any sort of vacuum, it won't be for power. It will most likely be a violence vacuum. With the Islamic Regime gone, Iranian Oil and gas money will no longer fund terrorist groups like Houthis and Hezbollah both of which are designated FTOs! The Taliban will no longer have an official coconspirator to oppress people in Afghanistan in the name of Islam. Turkey will lose its only official ally in oppressing people in all Kurdish regions. So not only will there not be a power vacuum, there will be a lot less to worry about for the leaders of the world concerning their countries' security.

What do you think about armed groups like Jaish al-Adl fighting against the regime, more violently than others?

Iranian people condemn violence against civilians under any circumstances. Jaish ul-Adl was founded some 10 years ago. Our fight against this regime has been going on for over 43 years. Even in their region of activity people have been protesting more at a grassroots level without any affiliation to them. Unfortunately, throughout history, their cause was never really aligned with those of the Iranian people and has ended up being an excuse for the regime to oppress people in Balochistan even more.

Would you agree that most Iranians don't see Israel as an enemy? And how would you address Israel's security concerns linked to the present regime? Do you think those Israeli concerns are legitimate?

Yes, most Iranians believe that the regime is their worst enemy and that has been one of their slogans for years, "Our enemy is here". Antisemitism is one of the main characteristics of the regime

and they have strategically included that in the education systems which is directly working on and affecting children. The system brainwashes children from an early age and cultivates its propaganda to grow with people. The main idea is that Israel has invaded Palestine and wants to invade Iran as well. They are coming to kill people like how they kill and treat people in Palestine and we are freedom fighters who are standing up for you and protecting you against evils, America and Israel. With that same excuse they started supporting Bashar Assad who was killing civilians in Syria and their theory was that Israel is getting close to Iran from Syria. They know people are traumatized by the Iran-Iraq war and they are still scared by that, they use it to make people support them to protect their country. In recent years what they lost was that fear element because of social media and people connecting from all over the world so they decided to ban most social media which was opening people's eyes to a different world.

What would you say about the situation of Iranian Jews living inside Iran?

They plant the antisemitism seed in children from an early age through the education system and media, just like how Hitler would train kids to be his soldiers. The mandatory course in religion which is a part of the curriculum from 5th grade starts to lay its foundation on Judaism. The history course includes a good section to explain the invasion of Palestine by Israel invaded and how brutal they are. Also despite covering World War 2 in our history lessons, there is nothing regarding Holocaust. Some officials go even further by publicly denying the Holocaust. Every morning children in the schoolyard stand in line and are told to chant "death to Israel " and "death to America " before going to their classes. Every year students are taken to a march to show solidarity with Palestinians and support the regime's fight for saving the innocents. Consequently, by the time we are adults we have a completely different image of Jews and being a Jew automatically means supporting Israel. Therefore Jews would be the target of hate.

Jews and generally any religious minority will not be approved to be nominated for presidency. They hold a seat in the parliament and have a representative but they are also under an immense amount of pressure. In 23 years of living in Iran, I have personally never seen an appearance of their representative on national TV or news channels. It sounds crazy but as a kid, I would sometimes wonder what Jews and Israelis looked like as human beings!

Do you think Iran can have good relations with Saudi Arabia under a new government?

Of course. The main reason for the conflict between Iran and Saudi is that Iran is the only Islamist government that is Shia. During Pahlavi, especially in the years between 70 and 80, Iran had good relations with the Saudi government, and that is possible again and has to happen after the regime change in Iran. Our fight is for peace with the entire world.

As you might know, there was recently an election in Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu is forming a new government. As an Iranian who wants a good future for Iran, what is your message to the new Israeli government? Also, do you feel Israel can and should play a role in helping protesters gain the upper hand?

We need the maximum support from every government including Israel. Considering that Netanyahu has strong conflicts with the regime and vice versa. Iran has been supporting "Hamas" for years to fight against Israel, which is also one of the effective variables and regime change is in their interest. However, in my opinion, people in Iran are not asking for military intervention from any other country. Especially since we have already experienced the Iran- Iraq war which led to many citizens losing their lives and due to the mismanagement of the government the cities affected by that war

have not recovered from this.

What is your message for the U.S. government? How do you think Washington can make a difference? Please feel free to give some suggestions in this regard.

Most importantly, what people fighting against the regime inside and outside of Iran are asking is the complete cancellation of the JCPOA and any kind of negotiation with the regime. Democrats along with NIAC have been on the front line of pushing for nuclear deals. That is what we are trying to avoid by speaking up and raising awareness. We want them to denounce the government, deport them, their families and affiliates, sanction all of them, seize and confiscate their properties and assets and condemn them for their crimes against humanity, 44 years after the revolution.

What would be your message for Iran's neighbours like India and Pakistan?

The Iranian people have had friendly relations with neighbouring countries throughout history. We respect all our neighbours and support their history, culture, and sovereignty. Unfortunately, when it comes to democracy and freedom of expression not all countries have the same level of freedom. But I know women in India have protested in solidarity with us and that's heartwarming! As far as the governments go, we hope everyone can respect our revolution and future sovereignty.

What is your message to the Iranian diaspora as well as the protesters in Iran? Please address both separately.

To the Iranian diaspora I would like to say, let's put any disagreement aside for once and all get united against our common enemy, the Islamic Republic and Iran lobby. Now it is the time to take back our stolen voice, raise awareness, educate the non-Iranian community and not let politicians make deals over our people's lives and our homeland. We need to take back our country and stand by our brothers and sisters fighting with bare hands.

To Iranians in Iran, I would like to say that we see you, hear you and fight for you with all of our resources and abilities to make your voice heard. We are proud of you and will not let the enemy diminish your blood and cover up its bloodshed and brutality like before. We are in this pain with you and we have your back.

Thank you for your time!



If you would like to hear more from Sana Ebrahimi, connect with her on social media:

Instagram: [@.sana_ebrahimi.](https://www.instagram.com/.sana_ebrahimi.)

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