Iranian Resistence between Opression and War:

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Interviewer: Dr. Simon Dümpelmann (Epis Think Tank)

Guest: Sahar Sanaie (Psychotherapist and Human Rights Activist)

Simon: Good evening, Sahar. In this interview, we will discuss the massive wave of protests in Iran, together with the political background of the conflict. You are based in Frankfurt, work as a psychotherapist, and have been active in the Iranian opposition in exile for years. How did you get there?

Sahar: Effectively because my personal history is closely linked to the fate of Iran: both of my parents were imprisoned in Iran. Two of my uncles were executed in 1981 at the ages of 17 and 19 for participating in protests; they were supporters of the People's Mojahedin (MEK). My father was killed by Revolutionary Guards when I was two years old. A cousin of my father was executed in 1988, together with tens of thousands of political prisoners. These events shaped me early on. I wanted to understand why they chose the path of resistance and decided to continue this path. I support the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the best-organized coalition of the democratic opposition since 1981.

Simon: The NCRI sees itself as the main democratic opposition force in Iran. However, in Western security circles, there is skepticism regarding your organizational structures and values. How do you take action, how do you coordinate, and how do you exert influence within Iran?

Sahar: The NCRI was founded in 1981 to form a political alternative to the Khomeini regime. It has 500 members from five organizations, with the People's Mojahedin being the largest. Importantly, 51% of the members are women, as we see the participation of women as the antithesis to Islamic fundamentalism. Our elected President-elect is Mrs. Maryam Rajavi. Our platform is the "10-Point Plan," which since 2006 has pursued the following goals: separation of state and religion; gender equality and a free market economy; abolition of the death penalty and Sharia laws; a nuclear-free Iran and an independent judiciary. The NCRI aims to put forward a transitional government for six months until free elections are held, with the goal of handing sovereignty back to the Iranian people. Within Iran, they have a

network of "Resistance Units." They exposed the regime's nuclear program in 2002 and have for decades demanded the listing of the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization. One does not have to agree ideologically with all member organizations. We want to form a national front against every form of autocracy—both against the Shah's dictatorship and against religious tyranny. We demand a secular democratic republic. Many young people in Iran are joining, even though the price is high. Time and again, supporters are sentenced to death and executed.

Regarding the skepticism: the regime has spent billions to defame the NCRI through its intelligence service, using lobbyists and so-called "Iran experts" in Western governments. Those spread the narrative that there is no alternative to the regime or that we are "cult-like," trying to demonize the NCRI. At times, for political reasons, we were listed as a terrorist organization, but after 12 years of legal battles in 19 trials, we were completely exonerated. We are funded through private donations worldwide—last year alone, over 7 million dollars were raised in a Telethon campaign.

Simon: The recent protests were the most intense and bloodiest in years. Reports of extreme violence were made public as soon as the internet was restored. Can you summarize the situation?

Sahar: These protests are part of a radicalization over decades. Due to its ideology, the regime is unable to meet the needs of the people. Since 2022, the economic crisis, exacerbated by sanctions and the financing of wars by the Revolutionary Guards (for example, through Bitcoin mining despite electricity shortages), has driven people to despair. In December, the Rial collapsed massively, leading to strikes by the Bazaar merchants.

NCRI Resistance Units coordinate these protests in over 400 cities. The regime responded with brutal violence: if they hadn't started shooting immediately, they would no longer exist. We have counted over 3,000 victims, many through targeted head shots. Even children were massacred on playgrounds. Today, people are clearly shouting: "Down with Khamenei" and "Down with the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Religious Leader."

Simon: From some Western perspectives—from some sources close to the Trump administration or from Israel—the son of the last Shah, Reza Pahlavi, is traded as a beacon of hope. It is said that the people in Iran have sympathies for him. How do you evaluate that?

Sahar: Pahlavi is inflated in the Western media, but he is an opportunist jumping on the bandwagon. He is a divisive figure and represents a fascist political current that incites against dissenters and ethnic nationalities, such as the Kurds. He has no social base in Iran. This is why he propagates military intervention as the solution, because he lacks an organized network. Donald Trump, despite pressure from the Pahlavi lobby, refused to meet him for this reason, and the German federal government also refrained from a meeting. As for the people in Iran, their slogans are clear: they reject every form of dictatorship—both that of the Shah and that of the Mullahs.

Simon: Speaking of "resistance units" coordinating armed protests, and leaving alone the rhetoric between opposition forces and regime, evokes unpleasant memories of Syria or Libya. In the recent history of the Middle East, reform efforts—from external interventions to the Arab Spring—have repeatedly slid into bloody civil wars. How do you assess this danger for Iran? And are there external actors you hope for?

Sahar: In Iranian history, there have never been civil wars, even though Iran is a multi-ethnic state. The difference from other countries is the existing, organized resistance with academic know-how, ready to rebuild the country democratically based on the 10-Point Plan. This resistance finds its legitimacy in the blood toll it has paid, with 120,000 executed members.

The nature of that resistance has been forged by the regime. When people are being shot at, they have the right to defend themselves. This can end in a liberation army. Many of the regime's Basij militias come from poor backgrounds themselves—it is a question of how long they will continue to shoot at their own relatives.

The last five decades have shown that foreign powers primarily sought their own advantages and relied on the reformability of the regime and the continuation of diplomatic relations. It has been shown that neither war nor appeasement is the solution. We have a proverb: "No one scratches my back except my own finger." We do not need weapons or financial aid from outside. We only want the West to stop providing fuel to the regime and to cut off all financial flows. Let the resistance do its work.

Simon: From the perspective of a third state, it may seem prohibitively risky to cut diplomatic ties and allow actors to operate over whom one has no influence. But at this point, thank you so much for your time and the effort to bring us closer to the current protests with its background, the situation of the various resistance groups, and their take on foreign policy.

Break: Interview recorded up to this point in mid-February 2026.

Simon: Good evening again, Sahar. Last time, our focus was on the huge protest waves around the turn of the year. Today, we must update these insights to a new situation: February 28th, Israel and the United States massively attacked Iran; Iran reacted, among other things, by blocking the Strait of Hormuz. This makes Iran effectively the center of attention globaly. We are experiencing war throughout the Middle East together with the largest oil crisis since records began, with the potential for a historic global economic crisis. In this geopolitical melee, the internal struggle between the population and the regime seems to have almost fallen out of view. What is the situation currently for the people in Iran?

Sahar: For us, the actual war has been going on for nearly five decades: it is the struggle between the Iranian people and this regime. Currently, the leadership is exploiting the fact that the focus of world news is on the

external war to massively increase repression domestically. They hope their "execution machinery" remains unnoticed. In the last three weeks, 16 political prisoners were executed, including eight members of the Resistance Units of the People's Mojahedin and eight young men between the ages of 18 and 21 who had been arrested during the protests in January.

The regime knows that as soon as the external war ends, nationwide uprisings await. Dissatisfaction has increased manifold since January. To prevent this and to raise the price for joining the organized resistance, these executions are taking place—whilst in a state of war, a government should actually protect its population instead of terrorizing them.

Simon: A heavy situation, undoubtedly. However, the distinction between the "actual" and the "non-actual" war seems somewhat problematic. Due to the American-Israeli attacks, several thousand Iranian civilians have died; the economic damage amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars. There are reports that artists and activists have positioned themselves as human shields in front of power plants and civilian infrastructure after Donald Trump threatened attacks. It seems as if the civilian population and the regime are moving closer together, at least partially, in this threat situation, given that the attackers obviously show little interest in the well-being of the Iranian population.

Sahar: This is exactly why the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and Mrs. Rajavi expressly welcomed the ceasefire. Our campaign "Peace and Freedom for Iran" stands in contrast to those forces—both within the regime and among the remaining monarchists—who advocate for a continuation of the war. I would like to criticize the position of Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah, here. He described this war as a "humanitarian mission," which we reject as anti-Iranian and anti-democratic. Anyone who advocates attacks on civilian infrastructure does not represent the interests of the people.

The war on the outside is happening, but the regime uses it as a curtain to veil the conflict on the inside. Peace and freedom can only arise if that core conflict is resolved—and that lies with the Iranian regime, its nuclear program, and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

Simon: Here we must delve deeper into geopolitics. The military escalation in the Middle East has progressed to a level where the regime today appears to sit more firmly in the saddle than it did in January. Through the Strait of Hormuz flows 20% of the world's oil exports; the energy supply of hundreds of millions of people depends on it. The Gulf states, the European nations, and the Asian powers are primarily concerned with stability. To them, the nature of the power guaranteeing this stability within the crisis is likely to become secondary.

Interestingly, there is also a personnel shift within the Iranian regime's power apparatus: the Israeli-American airstrikes targeted and killed second-tier leadership, the 'machinists' of the Revolutionary Guards—including rather pragmatic figures who still knew an order before the Islamic

Revolution of 1979. Their successors from the third tier of the apparatus, in contrast, know only the current state of the regime. This likely makes the Iranian leadership no less determined in their war efforts.

Sahar: We are convinced that this regime cannot be abolished by bombs from the air. An overthrow is only possible through an organized force on the ground that possesses the necessary ideology, readiness for sacrifice, and guerrilla experience. Our Resistance Units carried out over 4,000 military operations and 13,000 protest actions in the last year. During the protests in January 2026, they risked their lives to coordinate protests and ensure the protection of the people through street barricades. According to the People's Mojahedin, 2,000 members of the Resistance Units were arrested or killed in the process.

An example of the effectiveness of such operations: at the end of February, shortly before the start of the war, 250 members of the People's Mojahedin attacked the high-security headquarters of Khamenei in Tehran. Despite being guarded by 8,000 Revolutionary Guards, this operation succeeded. 100 members were killed or arrested, while 150 were able to escape with the help of the population. The regime keeps this incident secret because it shows that the Resistance Units are capable of attacking the heart of power directly.

The war is the consequence of decades of Western appeasement policy. Our warnings about Islamic fundamentalism were ignored, and the resistance was even temporarily listed as a terrorist organization so as not to jeopardize trade agreements with the Mullahs. This has kept the regime in power for at least two decades longer.

Simon: Well, many observers see the cause of the current escalation rather in Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) in 2018. Conversely, from a geopolitical perspective, the regime's actions in this asymmetric conflict—brutal as they are—appear strategically effective. The Revolutionary Guards seem excellently organized when it comes to effectively playing a relatively much weaker military hand.

Tragically against this backdrop, the international community currently appears to have little interest in any further destabilization of Iran. In the midst of a huge energy crisis hitting economic powers in Asia and Europe hard alongside the region's energy exporters, global energy security and the securing of trade flows appear to be given priority. The internal conflict between the population and the regime presumably recedes into the background. And as problematic as the Iranian regime certainly is, the alternative remains the somewhat breathtaking risk of a power vacuum.

Sahar: But this "stability" is an illusion. The regime is the main cause of instability throughout the Middle East. It invests 80% of its income in the repressive apparatus and in regional conflicts. Whether Hezbollah, the Hamas attacks on October 7th, or the provocations in Iraq—the regime pulls the strings everywhere to distract from the domestic situation. A democratic Iran, by contrast, would bring peace to neighboring states. The regime will

not back down on its own in this conflict. During a hot war, people go into protection mode, not uprising—the regime knows this and uses the window for executions to raise the price of joining the resistance.

But we do not demand money or weapons from the West, but the recognition of our right to self-defense and that an immediate stop to executions be anchored in all international agreements. Only an organized force with a specific ideology can abolish this system as a whole. The economic situation in Iran is on the verge of collapse: shortages of electricity and water, food scarcity, and the loss of millions of jobs. Even the Basij militias, who come from poor backgrounds, feel this pressure in their own daily lives. When the revolutionary force of the population meets the organized network of the People's Mojahedin, the potential to overthrow the regime will multiply. A split in the power apparatus from the bottom up is then very likely.

Simon: A complex and tragic situation, with the Iranian population in the difficult position between internal oppression and war from the outside. Thank you very much, Sahar, for your insights into the perspective of the organized resistance in Iran in this more than critical spring of 2026!

(Source: NWRI)

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