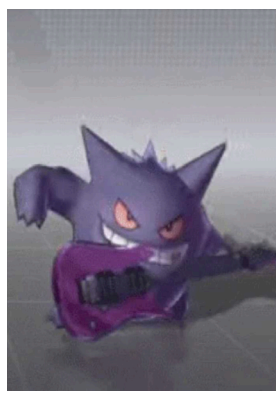
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Iranian Students Speak Out: International Protests and the Death of the Supreme Leader



Protestors in L.A. speaking about Iran. The U.S. and Israel are in an engagement with Iran currently. PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNA HEQIMI, CONTRIBUTOR

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From a nationwide uprising to the death of the supreme leader, Iranian students at the University of Connecticut are vocalizing their experiences and their reactions toward the war in Iran.

Sadaf Zarei is one of those students. Zarei, a sixth-semester economics and mathematics major, is the president of the Persian Students Association and a UConn Undergraduate Student Government Multicultural and Diversity senate candidate.

Zarei helped organize a vigil honoring and remembrance for those massacred by regime officials on Feb. 16. During her speech, she became emotional as she recounted seeing protestors with bullet-pierced chests and their noses blown off on social media.

Faculty, Iranian students and members of UConn Hillel, as well as College Democrats and College Republicans, all came together in reflection and solidarity.

Zarei was also one of the roughly 350,000 people who gathered in Los Angeles on Feb. 14 during the "Global Day of Action" to protest the current Iranian regime. Los Angeles, Munich and Toronto were designated as the main gathering points. Reza Pahlavi, the nation's exiled crown prince, urged the Iranian diaspora to stand in solidarity with those inside the country. Zarei said she attended in response to that call.

"It's up to us to be a continuation of the voice of our people inside Iran whose bravery was met with utmost brutality and violence," she said.

Zarei described the regime's violence as "gut-wrenching."

"Even hospitals are not safe for protesters," she said, saying how Iranian security officials raid medical facilities, detain demonstrators and, in some cases, shoot the wounded. She pointed to images from a Kahrizak morgue of bodies still attached to hospital equipment, with bullet wounds to the head.

Zarei recounted her middle and high school years in Iran, where every day she and other students were forced to chant "Death to Israel" and "Death to America." Zarei said even though they were forced, many, including herself, refused to participate in the chants.

She added that on the ground of mosque entrances and university campuses, there are the Israel and United States flags placed to encourage people to step on them. Zarei said many intentionally walked around the flags, underscoring civilian disagreement with Iran's ruling elite.

During the uprising that began on Dec. 28, 2025, protestors constantly cried "Death to the dictator!" "Death to the Islamic Republic!" "Javid Shah (Long Live the Shah)" and "This is the final battle, Pahlavi will return."

Zarei described the mass demonstrations against the regime as "a dignified movement for life and for the restoration of Iran's national sovereignty after 47 years of Islamic subjugation."

On Feb. 28, Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in an Israeli airstrike during an Israeli-U.S. joint operation. Zarei was one of the many people celebrating his death.

"I feel immense happiness, deep gratitude and a great deal of optimism. Iranians need to get to a free and fair ballot box, and his long-awaited death feels like a step in that direction," she said. "And as uncertain as the future is, one thing is certain: no one is shedding a single tear for that monster."

Even as she rejoices, she said her friends from the U.S. have conflicting feelings surrounding Khamenei's death.

"I want them to understand that the ramifications of a free Iran would extend far beyond Trump's presidency," she said. "Ultimately, having an ally rather than an adversary in Iran would benefit Americans of every political stripe for years to come, and the people of Iran have proven themselves ready to venture on this friendship."

Maryam Ahmadi is a Ph.D. student studying materials science and engineering. As her family and friends remain in Iran, she checks Instagram and X each day to receive updates.

"I see a new name, a new story, it's devasting," Ahmadi said as she learns about individual protestors killed.

She explained that she follows X because many of the posts contain firsthand testimonies and videos recorded directly by people from the streets in Iran, offering real-time documentation.

Ahmadi said that even the bloodiest massacre of unarmed civilians in this uprising has failed to extinguish the Iranian people's determination to reclaim their country.

"What was meant to terrify us has intensified collective anger and strengthened a shared sense of national purpose," she said.

She talked about an example in which the 40-day memorial gatherings — which take place 40 days after someone has died, and are culturally significant moments in Iranian tradition — became renewed points of mobilization. People gathered to honor the lives of those killed by the regime, clapping and celebrating them as a "national hero," and chanting against the governing body and in support for Pahlavi.

Shortly before the death of the supreme leader, protests resurfaced at major Iranian universities. Chants directly targeted Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards. There were expressions of support for a national alternative, symbolized by the Lion and Sun flag and Pahlavi.

Ahmadi said the demonstrations signified that the Iranian people want to return to a "golden era," prior to the 1979 Islamic Republic and reject the ideology of the revolution.

During the Feb. 14 demonstrations, she drove to Toronto, Canada, as Pahlavi called for people in the diaspora to stand in solidarity with civilians in Iran, while asking the international communities to take proper actions.

"I have to be the voice for the people in Iran who were brutally silenced. I have to fight for peace, for freedom and for democracy," she said.

In Munich alone, reports state that around 250,000 people participated in the multinational demonstrations. Reports also state that over 350,000 people participated in Toronto.

Following the death of the supreme leader, Ahmadi felt a flood of happiness.

"I felt relief that a symbol of a decades-long authoritarian rule is gone. I thought about all those who sacrificed so much," she said. "Iranians abroad have expressed gratitude toward the United States and Israel for actions that they believe will weaken this regime that has oppressed its own people for so long."

During demonstrations in cities including New York, London, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and Boston, people chanted slogans such as "Make Iran Great Again" and thanked the United States and Israel.

Iranians expressed their deep gratitude toward President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for killing Khamenei.

In multiple cities in Iran, videos circulated showing people dancing, honking car horns and cheering.

"We still ask Israel and the U.S. to continue operations aimed at dismantling the regime's power structures so that eventually Iranians can once again take to the streets openly, without fear to reclaim their country. We will never forget this help. God bless America, God bless Israel and God bless Iran," Ahmadi said.

Eli — who wishes to not disclose her last name to protect her family in Iran — is a Ph.D. student and came to the U.S. in 2022.

Eli said that when the internet shutdown occurred from the uprising, people were angry, yet hopeful of a regime change.

Pahlavi called citizens to protest the current regime on Jan. 8 and Jan. 9 in support for a political transition in Iranian leadership.

When protestor execution began, Eli feared for her family back home.

"I remember every moment we were looking at our phones, and we were expecting the U.S. or other leaders of the world to do something," she said. "I would wake up in the middle of the night to check my phone to see if I had any messages from my family."

She said after a few days, she contacted family back home through landlines, unable to connect through WhatsApp or FaceTime. Fearing the Islamic Republic and the possibility of her phone calls being recorded, she and her family were unable to speak clearly regarding the situation in Iran.

"When the numbers came out, and the pictures of all the body bags and the people looking for their loved ones amongst those body bags, that was the depth of depression that we felt. It's concrete proof of what this regime is capable of," she said.

Eli said Pahlavi gives people hope.

"He's been trying to make Iran great again. He's always been advocating for a secular democratic government," Eli said.

Eli said that there are representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran who speak at the United Nations. Her call to action is "to not legitimize the Islamic Republic as the rightful regime ruling the nation. We don't want any negotiations with this regime."

Elika is also a Ph.D. student from Iran. She wished to not disclose her last name to protect her family back home from Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps retaliation.

Elika said what is most important to her right now is "to be the voice of my people in Iran and to raise awareness of what is happening." She aims to inform the international community that a growing segment of the Iranian population is advocating for a transition to a new governing body, fighting for Pahlavi to be the nation's new leader.

She expressed frustration over the number of those killed from the regime, saying it is highly underreported. As of Jan. 27, it is stated that more than 30,000 have been killed, yet she believes that number is much higher. She was one of a handful of those in attendance during a vigil held on the UConn Student Union Lawn on Feb. 16 honoring and remembering demonstrators killed from regime officials.

"The vigil was to first honor the brave people of Iran who sacrificed their life for freedom after 40 days the massacres were conducted by the IRGC," she said, adding that the vigil also served to spread the message to international communities that the Iranian people are united in their efforts to accept Pahlavi as their leader of an established secular democratic nation.

"The Islamic Republic is the enemy of the Iranian people and the Middle East due to the terrorism and genocide committed," Elika said.

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