Iranian Counterculture and Gen Z

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Arash Aalaei is a veteran television producer and video journalist who has reported on Iran for outlets such as CBS News, People magazine, Voice of America, and Iran International television.

Brief Analysis

Decades of underground counterculture have led to an informed and interconnected youth in Iran, now eager for freedom and change.

As the protests in Iran move into their fourth month, the Islamic republic has resorted to more desperate measures to quash them: sham trials, forced confessions, mobilizing sympathizers, and most recently the first of what may prove to be a wave of executions. The executions of 23 year olds Mohsen Shakari and Majidreza Rahnavard show the regime is willing to publicly spill blood to quell the unrest. Nevertheless, in spite of the public and masked brutality towards demonstrators, the protests in Iran are showing no signs of dying down.

The importance of the Iranian countercultural underground to generations of Iranians chafing under the regime's system, along with the personal stories of young protesters killed for speaking out against it, help provide a window into the deep motivations behind those who continue to return to the streets. If anything, the videos and anecdotes shared on social media indicate that the voices of dissent are growing, while the regime seems at a loss as to how to extinguish the fire. While analysts and pundits on the outside are scratching their heads trying to figure out the extent and significance of the protest movement, one thing that is clear is the courage and the persistence of these protesters, especially Iran's "Gen Z"—those born around the turn of the millennium who are now teenagers and young adults.

Despite the Islamic regime's isolationist attitude and culture of conformity, the influence of a decades-long underground society in Iran is now helping bring youth into the streets. Iranian youth have long consumed western music and movies and have attempted to replicate them inside Iran. In many ways, this growing countercultural environment of the past forty years, along with unprecedented access to the outside world, has primed a new generation to reject the Islamic regime. In the age of the internet, satellite TV, and the miracle of the marketplace, Iran's Gen Z has been exposed to the knowledge and ideas of the outside world, and they are well aware that the regime is lying to them.

Throughout the 1980s, VCR systems became prevalent in Iran's urban areas, where a margin of the middle class and

affluent Iranians could access western movies and media entertainment. The impact of western cultural icons accessible through these VCRs was embodied in the popularity of and admiration for Michael Jackson. When I was six, my aunt took me to a party in Mellat Park where we were able to watch a few Michael Jackson impersonators "breakdancing."

Of course, the rule in our house—and as I understood later in almost every house—was that one was never to talk about the VCR to anyone at school. In fact, the regime had banned VCR systems for many years, and had implemented strict measures to crack down on the black market of VCR tape deliveries. Even so, on a weekly basis we could select from underground "menus" providing a whole range of movies and series, which would need to be watched and returned within the week.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, Iran's underground counterculture—originally fed by VCR systems—continued to flourish as satellite dishes mushroomed over the roofs of almost all Iranian cities, villages, and suburban areas. Iran's own official statistics indicate that 80 percent of the population in urban areas obtained access to satellite TV. Every week without fail, northern Tehran turned into a ghost town when *Baywatch* ran on satellite—there were even *Baywatch* "binge parties" around the city. I knew more guys in high school with a Pamela Anderson poster on their walls than pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini.

And by the 2000s, Iran boosted its Internet infrastructure, and Iranians suddenly had a chance to connect even more directly to the outside world through local net cafes. Suddenly thousands of Iranians were on Paltalk and in Yahoo chat rooms, learning about the world first hand by chatting with people from different countries and backgrounds. Social media, while restricted, has become a platform for cultural expression on a scale larger than any previous medium. According to the World Bank, 84% of Iranians had access to the Internet by 2020.

Iranian celebrities now attract millions of fans on social media platforms like Instagram, where they can post about fashion, international cuisines, travel, and sometimes even domestic politics.

The regime views expressions of this desire to engage with the outside world as treacherous, while western media only gave occasional and fleeting coverage to this movement over the past few decades. I personally experienced this dynamic in 1999, when my band held the first English-language rock concert in Iran since the revolution. ABC Network was in Iran covering the sixth parliamentary elections, and we invited them to our studio where we played Dire Straits and Pink Floyd. We then brought them to Sooreh University—which shares a wall with Ayatollah Khamenei's house in Tehran—and played songs such as "Get Over It" by the Eagles. ABC subsequently did a four minute TV segment on us called "Iranian Rockers."

Although we were not political, our concerts, like every action, became political in Iran. Our performance was an unacceptable anomaly, and after three public gigs, we were never permitted to perform again. Ultimately, half of the band immigrated to the United States once the regime tried to silence us. By refusing to allow us to express ourselves, the Islamic Republic made an enemy of us, as they have now done with Iran's Gen Z.

Now, young Iranians who have similarly striven to establish an identity outside the bounds of the Iranian regime's expectations are being murdered. Sarina Esmail Zadeh and Nika Shahkarami—two protesters who were allegedly raped and killed by Iranian security forces during the current protest movement—are examples of what freedoms Iran's Gen Z is fighting for, and what lengths the regime will go to deny them that freedom.

Sarina, who was 16 when she was murdered in the city of Karaj located on the outskirts of Tehran, was a Youtuber. On her channel, Sarina discussed fashion, make-up, and school exams. A video of her lip syncing the Irish band Hozier's "Take Me to Church" went viral, with millions of views across social media.

Sarina also used her platform to voice her frustrations with the restrictions in her life. In one video, Sarina spoke about the challenges and discrimination she faces as an Iranian girl and stated her rejection of the mandatory hijab.

“You know we are not given the same opportunities as boys are in this country,” she said. In another video, she talked about how relieved she felt when the stress of school exams was over: “It feels as if I am suddenly free.” Like many others, Sarina took those frustrations and hopes for change out onto the streets of Gohardasht—neighboring Karaj—to protest the regime. Soon after, on September 23, she was found dead, beaten by batons and raped according to Amnesty International.

There are reports—including text messages on Telegram—indicating that Sarina had joined other girls on the street that day to protest the brutal killing of another teenage protester, Nika Shahkarami. Like Sarina, Nika had found a new sense of self and identity through the internet, especially as she connected with her peers in other countries. One day, Nika met a girl named Nele from Leipzig, Germany, while on Instagram. The two messaged each other regularly about music, anime, and true crime stories in the West, soon falling in love. Nele told Zeit Magazine that Nika was “her other half.”

But while Nele was safe in Germany, the relationship was a huge risk for Nika in Iran. Born and raised in the suburbs of Tehran, Nika grew up constantly bombarded by discriminatory anti-Western, misogynistic, anti-Jewish and Christian, and anti-enlightenment narratives in the educational system, mainstream culture, and political spheres of life. Nika had to fight a system that not only rejected Western influence but denounced, stigmatized, and criminalized her identity as a member of the LGBTQ community. Nevertheless, like many Iranians, Nika embraced Western culture and found acceptance through Iran’s underground globalized society, breaking every rule in the Ayatollah’s book. And when she took to the streets to fight for this identity and fight for change, she paid the ultimate price. She went missing on September 20.

These, of course, are the stories of Iranian youth that the regime does not want you to hear. After Nika’s death, for example, authorities attempted to sell the narrative that Nika had fallen from a roof. Witnesses told a very different story, and Nika’s mother told Radio Free Europe that Nika had severe injuries to her head.

The stories of Nika, Sarina, Mahsa Amini, and many other Iranian Gen Z youth are absolutely crucial in understanding the true nature of today’s protests. Fueled by decades of increased access to the outside world, these young citizens are standing up to express their dreams, denouncing the status quo that Iran has tried so hard to enforce. Nika’s and Sarina’s deaths underline the privileges that we take for granted in the West—the freedom of speech and self-expression. Iran’s Gen Z have been deprived of these freedoms for too long, and they are now fighting for them in the hope of a different future. ❖

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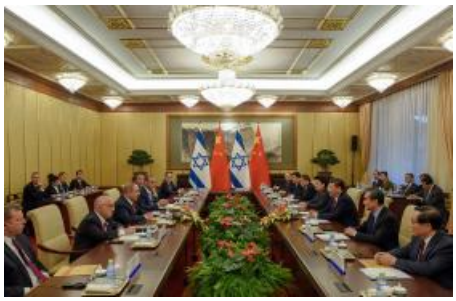

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