

Toronto

Tensions rise in Toronto's Persian community as activists try to expose regime links in Canada

Iranian government insiders live with impunity in Canada, activists say

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Tensions between supporters of the Iran regime and those who want change are being felt in the Iranian diaspora in Toronto. (Robert Krbavac/Radio-Canada)

Editor's Note: This article was modified on Feb. 10, 2023, to include comments by Wahab Zamani, whose butcher shop was initially alluded to but not identified by name. Radio-Canada had attempted to contact him before the story was published in November, 2022, but was unsuccessful. The article has been updated with Zamani's comments from an interview in early February, 2023.

As the uprisings continue in Iran, tensions between supporters of the regime and those who aspire to revolution are being felt in the Iranian diaspora.

In Toronto, anti-regime activists have moved to expose government insiders who they say live with impunity in Canada.

"This man sent me, along with many other students, to prison," said Ardeshir Zarezadeh, an Iranian-born Toronto paralegal, pointing to his computer screen.

On the website of his organization, the International Center for Human Rights, the photo of Morteza Talaei, the former police chief of Tehran and officer of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), seen on a treadmill, in a gymnasium in Richmond Hill, Ont., in January.

Since the beginning of the uprising in Iran, Zarezadeh has called on members of the Iranian diaspora in Canada to send him information concerning relatives of the Iranian regime who visit or live in Canada in order to expose them on his website.

“There is an expression in Iran that Canada is the regime's paradise.”

— *Mohammad Tajdolati, Iranian journalist based in Toronto*

"We all know that many people affiliated with the Iranian regime live in Canada. They come and go."

"They take advantage of life in Canada," said Zarezadeh, who spent nearly six years in Iranian prisons for his involvement in student movements.

For Mohammad Tajdolati, there is no doubt that the presence of supporters of the Iranian regime in Canada has exacerbated tensions within the Iranian diaspora since the beginning of the uprising.

"There is an expression in Iran that Canada is the regime's paradise," says the Iranian journalist based in Toronto.



Ardeshir Zarezadeh spent almost six years in prison in Iran. He is now trying to expose those close to the regime who live in Canada. (Radio-Canada)

The activist claims to have contacted the federal government on several occasions in recent years to denounce the presence of relatives of the regime on Canadian territory, without concrete measures being taken by Ottawa.

"They tell us, 'We know, we're watching them,' but that's not enough. [...] That is why we are taking matters into our own hands," he said.

On Oct. 29, in a long-awaited speech by the diaspora, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised to maintain sanctions against the Iranian regime and its leaders. A promise received with skepticism by Zarezadeh.

“You can't do much legally, but by identifying them and exposing them, you can make people cut ties with them, or with their business.”

- Marjan

"We know that there are people today in Canada who have benefited from this horrible and corrupt regime and who are hiding in the middle of the community enjoying the opportunities that Canada offers. They are using the wealth they stole from the Iranians. We say: enough is enough," Trudeau said.

He is not the only one. It was this same frustration that prompted Marjan* (her name has been changed) to begin investigating Iranian regime supporters in Canada. The young Torontonion left Iran to escape repression.

Radio-Canada granted her anonymity, because she fears reprisals against her or her family who still lives in Iran.



Marjan has launched an Instagram account and regularly posts photos and documents to expose people she considers as Iranian regime insiders and their families who live in Canada. (Radio-Canada/Rozenn Nicolle)

After arriving in Canada, she says she kept her distance from her home community. The uprising in Iran, however, ignited a new flame within her. On the [opiran.toronto](#) Instagram account, she now speaks out against government insiders whose families she says live freely in Canada.

"When I see these people here, it's like post-traumatic stress disorder for me. I see them near my home, in the street, I see their children playing freely when I did not have this luxury in my country," she said.

"You can't do much legally, but by identifying them and exposing them, you can make people cut ties with them, or with their business."

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Even if he understands the anger of his compatriots, Tajdolti is worried about the abuses that some of their actions could cause, such as the denunciation of individuals online. "You have to be very careful because we live in a country of law. You can't accuse someone very easily," he warns.

Zarezadeh says he is aware of the risk of defamation. "We make sure that the information we publish is true," he said, assuring that he will continue his fight.

Exacerbated tensions, broken wall of fear

Beyond online denunciations, tensions are also crystallizing in the community. In "Little Tehran," a cluster of Iranian shops on Yonge Street in north Toronto, certain incidents have multiplied since the beginning of the uprising.

Graffiti in Farsi saying "death to the mullahs," for example, was painted on the walls of the Imam Mahdi Islamic Centre in Thornhill, just north of the area. The mosque was quick to refute any political allegiance.

In front of the same mosque, signs with the portrait of the young Mahsa Amini, whose death was the spark of the movement, have been removed, according to a video widely shared on the WhatsApp network. And still in the same place, a motorist tried to rush into anti-regime demonstrators before fleeing and being arrested by the police.



The walls of the Imam Mahdi Islamic Center mosque in Thornhill, north of Toronto, were covered in graffiti saying, in Farsi, "death to the dictator", "death to the mullahs" and "down with the Islamic republic". The posts were quickly covered in paint, as seen in this image taken shortly after the incident. (CBC)

Not too far from there, opposite the famous Plaza Irania on Yonge Street, a butcher shop has been the target of online vandalism and intimidation by people accusing it of having links with the Iranian regime.

Wahab Zamani, the owner of Zamani Meats, says that he's being the victim of false rumours and he refutes any allegiance to the regime in Tehran.

Zamani says he has received death threats and that he filed a complaint with the police in connection with those incidents. He says that is why he has not, until now, responded publicly to the allegations.

The rumours, he adds, have had serious consequences for his business and his family. Zamani maintains that other businesses were also falsely targeted.

York Regional Police, which serves the territory, says it is not concerned about a possible increase in hateful acts related to the situation in Iran. However, the police say they are aware of the divisions that exist within the Iranian community in the Greater Toronto Area.

According to Tajdolati, tensions have always been underlying in the community, with supporters of the two ideologies living together. What changes this time is that fear has changed sides, according to the journalist.



Mohammad Tajdolati is an Iranian-Canadian journalist, living in Toronto for thirty years and covering the news of the Iranian diaspora. (Radio-Canada/Rozenn Nicolle)

"The people you see on the streets now, before, they didn't come to demonstrations because they were afraid," he said, explaining that being photographed at an event like this could make it difficult afterward to travel to Iran or could make things difficult for their families back home.

Now, he continues, "the situation is so atrocious in Iran, it is so brutal, so inhuman, that these people say to themselves, 'No, that is enough. I want to participate, I want to do my duty as a human being, as an Iranian.'"

"The wall of fear has broken down."

Corrections

- An initial version of this story referred to Ardashir Zarezadeh as a lawyer. In fact, Zarezadeh is a paralegal who is a member of the Ontario Bar Association.
Feb 03, 2023 11:08 AM ET
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This is an adaptation of an article by Radio-Canada's Andréane Williams and Rozenn Nicolle

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