

Actress Nazanin Boniadi on why China shouldn't be mediator in the Middle East

By [Nassim Khadem](#)

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Nazanin Boniadi at a protest rally in support of the #WomenLifeFreedom movement. (Supplied.)

Iranian born British-American actress and human rights activist Nazanin Boniadi wants to see peace in the Middle East, but she worries about China seeking the role of mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Boniadi, who has dedicated much of her working life to advocating for human rights, including in Iran — her country of birth that her family escaped soon after the 1979 revolution — questions China's motives, suggesting they are not altruistic.

"The Chinese rapprochement between Saudi and Iran is something that Australia should care about as a democracy," Boniadi tells ABC News in an exclusive interview, following China's attempt at playing Middle East power broker.

"I think the intention for these autocracies is for China to replace the US and the West as a global superpower."

In a sign of its ongoing power struggle with Washington, on March 10, Beijing facilitated historic talks between long-time enemies Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has held similar talks since.



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang shake hands during a meeting in Beijing. (Reuters: Iran's Foreign Ministry/WAN)

China has stated its goal was to restore diplomatic relations between the two oil-rich nations, thereby ending a long history of mistrust and animosity.

"I think we will have to worry about autocracies taking that top spot in the world, and what that would look like for the rest of us," Boniadi says.

"We, the democratic countries, really have to unite in the same way that these autocracies are uniting to prevent that from happening."



Actress Nazanin Boniadi arrives for the world premiere of Hotel Mumbai at the Toronto International Film Festival. (EUTERS)

It is late June when Boniadi does an interview with ABC News.

She's just been invited to speak via video-link before Australia's parliament about Iran's human rights abuses, after the death-in-custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini sparked widespread protests across Iran and [paved the way for the global #WomanLifeFreedom movement](#).

She's been announced the winner of Australia's version of the Nobel Peace Prize — the 2023 Sydney Peace Prize — for her commitment to advancing women's rights in Iran and will arrive in Australia next week to receive the award in person.

But with the breakout of the Israel-Gaza war since our interview, Boniadi continues to repeat the message about upholding democracy as a weapon against authoritarian rule.

In a recent post on X, formerly known as Twitter, she noted "the Islamic Republic's strategic support of Hamas has diverted attention away from its ongoing crimes against the Iranian people" and that, "If you care about Palestinian lives and liberation, the IR and Hamas are no friends of yours".

'If authoritarians are united, we will never defeat tyranny'

Boniadi's acting career — with TV and film credits including How I Met Your Mother, Homeland, Hotel Mumbai, Bombshell and Amazon's Lord of the Ring series — has elevated her profile, and thereby her ability

to agitate for regime change.

"I'm not naive to the fact that the reason I have a platform to begin with is really as an actor and as an artist," she says.

Nazanin Boniadi  

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And just like that the Islamic Republic's strategic support of Hamas has diverted attention away from its ongoing crimes against the Iranian people, and has successfully galvanized support for itself abroad as some kind of heroic anti-imperialist force.

To be clear, the IR is a... [Show more](#)

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still from the 2018 film Hotel Mumbai featuring actor Nazanin Boniadi as Zahra. (Supplied: Icon Distribution)

Boniadi travels the globe, meeting top US officials at Capitol Hill, speaking at meetings at the United Nations in New York, constantly using her platform to support the people of Iran in their fight for human rights and freedom.

In 2018, she was selected by People Magazine as one of their 25 Women Changing the World.

Between 2009 and 2015 she served as a spokeswoman for Amnesty International USA.

But over the past year, in the wake of the protests that swept Iran in one of the [most serious challenges to the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution](#), she's been among the most outspoken figures in the Iranian diaspora.

She's used her platform and famous friends in Hollywood to help promote the #WomenLifeFreedom movement and bring greater global recognition of the plight that Iran's women face under the Islamic Republic.

This has seen her frequently targeted by regime-supporters and trolls on social media.

Her message for Australia's leaders is unequivocal: "Stop the Islamic Republic in committing atrocities against its people and in destroying what she labels as "the global liberal order".



Global Premiere of The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power, in London. (REUTERS)

"As long as champions of freedom are divided, while autocracies and authoritarians are united, we will never defeat tyranny," she says.

"[The IRGC] is not tasked with protecting or defending the Iranian people. On the contrary, to the contrary, it is cracking down on and brutalising the Iranian people, as well as being responsible for regional aggression and global terrorism."

It's a message she gave before the breakout of the Israel-Gaza war, but it's one that stands today, with Hams itself confirming Iran's support for the attacks against Israeli civilians and a [White House spokesman saying that Iran is "complicit"](#).

Last week Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian warned of possible "pre-emptive action" against Iran as Israel began preparations for a ground offensive on the Gaza Strip.

YOUTUBE: What the Israel-Gaza war means for oil and the global economy.

'Stand unequivocally with the Iranian people'

A recent Senate inquiry into Iran's human rights abuses called for the federal government to list the military arm of Iran's regime, the IRGC, as a terrorist organisation.

But the Albanese government has instead slapped a series of [Magnitsky-style sanctions against Iranian officials](#), which many in the diaspora, including Boniadi, argue don't go far enough.

"The world has not done enough to stand unequivocally with the Iranian people," Boniadi says.



zanin Boniadi at a UN Security Council meeting focused on the ongoing protests in Iran, at the United Nations in New York City. (REUTERS.)

Boniadi notes Australia's "accomplishment" in helping kick the Islamic Republic off the UN Commission on the Status of Women as "unprecedented" but says "these achievements are often followed by demoralising setbacks".

She said just months later a representative from Iran's regime was invited to chair the UN Human Rights Council's social forum.

"What I'm asking is that the Australian government ... designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terror organisation. That they encourage the UK, Europe, Canada to do the same, and really join in a global effort ...
in a unified manner."



niadi says there need to be a definition of apartheid that helps fight the repression of women in countries like Iran where the death-in-custody of Mahsa Amini led to the #womenlifefreedom movement. (REUTERS/Elizabeth Frantz/File photo)

A spokeswoman for Foreign Minister Penny Wong told ABC News: "The IRGC is a malignant actor that has long been a threat to international security, and to its own people ... That is why we are using the tools available to us to take meaningful action, including sanctioning 27 IRGC-linked individuals and 21 IRGC-linked entities."



nny Wong has imposed a series of sanctions on Iranian officials.

Boniadi notes the Islamic Republic has survived because Western powers fail to help Iran's people in their calls for regime change.

She says Western democracies haven't yet found a way to circumvent and overcome internet crackdowns in Iran.

"That in of itself is a failure on our part," she says.

"We have to try a different approach. And that approach has to be to disempower the Islamic Republic and empower civil society inside Iran."



zanin Boniadi attends the Elle's Women in Television event in Los Angeles. (RUETERS.)

She also calls for a definition of gender apartheid in international law, saying that right now it only applies to racial apartheid.

This week another Iranian teenage girl Armita Geravand, allegedly beaten by Iran's morality police, was [announced as "brain dead" as journalists were jailed](#) over Mahsa Amini coverage.

"What's happening in a country like Iran or Afghanistan is that there is gender apartheid, the segregation and oppression of women is really a pillar of the Islamic Republic," Boniadi says.

"Getting that defined internationally will help us hold the regime to account in a similar way that we that we did for apartheid South Africa."

Diaspora 'disunity' is what Iran's regime wants

Boniadi says the Islamic Republic has survived for 44 years, because it "plants the seeds of division".

She is one of the main voices of a US-based coalition calling for a secular democracy. This coalition came together during a highly publicised event held at Georgetown in Washington in February.

Boniadi was among several notable voices including [Iran's exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi](#), Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, [US-based activist Masih Alinejad](#), Secretary General of the Kurdish Komala Party Abdullah Mohtadi and Canadian-based activist Hamed Esmailion.



From left to right, Reza Pahlavi, Nazanin Boniadi, Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmailion speak on behalf of Iran's democratic movement. (Supplied.)

But months after that event, the Crown Prince and Esmailion left the alliance, sparking a row on social media between monarchists who are still loyal to Pahlavi and Esmailion supporters.

The tensions opened up questions about whether the Islamic Republic will ever fall amid such cases of disunity in the diaspora.

Asked whether such disunity reduces the prospect of a democracy in Iran, Boniadi says: "The people who are going to achieve regime change are inside the country. All we can do is be conduits and a megaphone."

"It's about what they [Iranians] want. And when I speak to them, what I hear from them is that, you know, they can't afford for the diaspora to be disunited, when they're confronted with the battle of their lives, when their lives are at risk."

It is difficult to have organised opposition inside Iran – many of the dissidents who could take leadership of a secular democracy remain in Iranian jails.

Outside of Iran, the pro-democracy movement Boniadi is part of is not aligned with other controversial groups such as the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq or MEK.

The MEK was founded in 1965 by leftist Iranian students opposed to the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and was once listed as a terrorist organisation by the US.



monstrators shout slogans and hold pictures of Maryam Rajavi outside an office of the French Interior Ministry in Paris, during a protest. (Philippe Wojazer: Reuters)

The MEK, which also goes in the West by the name, "the National Council of Resistance of Iran" has drawn criticism for being opaque with its leader Maryam Rajavi closing off the ability for people to comment on posts made on her social media accounts like X (formerly known as Twitter).

Boniadi doesn't comment on the MEK, but in terms of the pro-democracy movement that she is part of, she notes that Iranians "are not looking to their left or to their right" and that "those of us living in democracies can set aside our differences, to support and empower them".

Iran's leaders 'divide and oppress' beyond their own borders

Boniadi says the regime in Iran has mastered the "policy of divide and oppress" and that this extends far beyond its own borders.

"What it (the regime in Iran) has managed to do is politically gaslight Western progressives and feminists, for example, by conflating support for Iranian civil society with interventionism," she says.

"This is while the Islamic Republic supports armed militias across the Middle East and Russia's war on Ukraine. It's skilfully coopted this anti-imperialist narrative, trying to paint us the opposition as Western stooges and deny us our agency."



zanin Boniad. (Supplied)

[Iranian-Australian actor Mojean Aria](#) agrees the Iranian regime and its allies have benefited from dividing and conquering Iranians and says Boniadi has been one of the key figures who is trying to put an end to that.

"The burden she's taken on to do so is gigantic," Aria says.

"It's not just the Iranians in the diaspora or Iranians within Iran that owe her [Boniadi] a great deal but it's truly anyone who wants to see a more harmonious peaceful earth and for us to be rid of our dictators and corruption."



stralian-Iranian actor Mojean Aria says Boniadi has taken on a gigantic burden. *(Supplied.)*

"I'm sure she's paid a great price to do so ... she holds the pain of brutal dictatorship we've all been subjected to these last 44 years, and no one has been able to channel that pain into organising our revolution better."

Another outspoken diaspora activist who works with Boniadi in taking that message to the world is Gazelle Sharmahd.

She is based in California where Boniadi also lives and is the daughter of dual German-Iranian citizen and US national [Jamshid Sharmahd who is in Iranian prison facing the prospect of execution after being taken hostage by Iran's regime.](#)



mshid Sharmahd (centre) is on death row in Iran but his daughter Gazelle (right) isn't giving up hope he can be ed. (Supplied.)

Sharmahd believes despite some tensions, the diaspora is more united than it's ever been and says, "Nazanin is one of the greatest pillars and representatives of the diaspora in the fight against terrorism".

"Everywhere she goes she (Boniadi) spreads the message of unity, which is so important," Sharmahd says.

Iranians in exile dream of visiting a free Iran

Living in exile can stir up emotions that propel activism. Like many diaspora Iranians who were forced to leave Iran after the 1979 revolution, Boniadi was 20 days old when her parents fled Iran for London.

Her parents did not want to raise their daughter in an environment that was becoming oppressive towards women, many of whom were — and are still — being imprisoned and lashed and beaten for protesting the hijab.



zanin Boniadi is the recipient of the 2023 Sydney Peace Prize. *(Supplied.)*

Like many others in the diaspora calling for regime change, Boniadi is partly driven by the idea of wanting to go back to a free Iran with members of her family.

She visited Iran when she was 13 and the experience gave her a taste of what life would have been like under the Islamic Republic.

She recounts the story about how she was walking down the street with her 45-year-old uncle and was stopped by a member of the plain-clothed "morality police" who asked them to show a marriage certificate. They had assumed she was his wife.

"It was a jarring experience," she tells ABC News.

"I had a glimpse at the daily indignities experienced and suffered by girls and women inside the country, and by the people of Iran, in general, in the two months I was there."



men shop in the old main bazaar of Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Oct. 1, 2022. Iranian police have announced a new campaign to force women to wear the Islamic headscarf. (AP Photo: Vahid Salemi, File)

She says if she returns one day to a free democratic Iran, "my hope is that I get to experience that rich culture, the beauty of the country, which I did, but in a way that's free, in a way where the people are free to act and dance in the streets and act how they want".

"Where the economy is thriving, ... where women can attend sports arenas, and not be segregated from men on buses, ... where people can go onto the streets and not fear the police.

"I hope that I get to witness that. But more importantly, I hope my parents who have been exiled from Iran — my father hasn't been back to Iran, he can't he's a political refugee — and so many Iranians who are in exile, get to experience that."