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'The Iranian regime holds all the cards': children of jailed Nobel winner on learning to live without their mother

Human rights activist Narges Mohammadi has been in prison in Iran for most of her children's lives. Now living as exiles in Paris, they say they will never lose hope of seeing her again

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Last December, just an hour or so after she stood on the world stage to accept the Nobel peace prize for her mother, Iranian human rights activist Narges Mohammadi, 17-year-old Kiana Rahmani found herself staring at the outline of a cell taped on the floor of the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo.

Part of an exhibition commemorating what the Nobel committee described as Mohammadi's "fight to promote human rights and freedom for all", the tape marked the dimensions of her mother's isolation cell in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran. Roughly 2 metres by 3 metres, it was about the size of a car parking space.



📷 A portrait of Narges Mohammadi at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo. Photograph: Anadolu/Getty Images

Mohammadi was kept in a room like this for 64 days in Evin prison in 2021. Amnesty International says she was tortured and subjected to inhumane treatment including keeping her under bright lights 24 hours a day and denying her access to fresh air and natural light. In her 2022 book, *White Torture*, Mohammadi writes that “the conditions of the cell ... leaves a crack in a part of the human mind”.

Mohammadi has spent much of her children’s lives incarcerated behind prison walls. Her relentless refusal to be silenced on women’s rights, equality and the end of the death penalty in [Iran](#) has meant she has already served 12 years in prison on overlapping sentences on charges related to national security.

In January, just weeks after the Nobel peace prize ceremony, a revolutionary court in Iran [sentenced her to a further 15 months](#) for spreading propaganda against the state while in prison.

Kiana and her twin brother Ali last saw their mother nine years ago when they left Iran to join their father, the political activist Taghi Rahmani, in exile in Paris. They say the latest sentence is another act of torture perpetrated on their family by the Iranian regime.



▶ Ali and Kiana Rahmani photographed in their flat in Paris last month. Photograph: Isabelle Eshraghi/Agence VU/The Guardian

“It’s like a game [for the regime] where they hold all the cards in their hand,” says Kiana. “Every time my mum thinks she has a good card in her hand they can cheat and change the rules. It’s easy to win for them. We are all helpless in the face of this power.”

In their small flat in Paris, a replica of Mohammadi’s [Nobel peace prize](#) jostles for position with other human rights accolades and the clutter of family life.

In the years since they last saw their mother, Kiana and Ali have grown into young adults who have learned to survive her absence. Ali has channelled his pain into activism, following his parents into campaigning for political reform and justice in Iran. Kiana has coped by building her own dreams of a normal life.

“My dad and my brother speak about Iran and about politics all the time and I just go to my room,” she says. “I want to just get on with my own life.”



📷 Kiana in her room at home. 'Nothing can fill the void of being without your mother,' she says. Photograph: Isabelle Eshraghi/Agence VU/The Guardian

She says seeing the outline of the isolation cell on the floor of the Nobel Peace Center came as a visceral and shocking reminder of the price her mother has paid for putting her values and beliefs before her personal freedom.

"When I saw the size of her isolation cell, I realised I had never really thought about how small it was," she says. "To be stuck in there, in a space that was the size of two tables pushed together, how did she not lose her mind? I realised what was actually happening in Iran. I heard people chanting my mother's name. I came back a wiser and better person."

▲▲ *The last time we spoke to my mother ... I said, listen Mum, I am with you, I don't blame you, I am proud of you*
Ali Rahmani

Kiana and Ali feel the weight of responsibility for keeping Mohammadi's name on the lips of the international community.

"We need to keep shouting about my mother, but we also represent many other families in Iran who have also had their loved ones taken from them," says Ali.

Since the repression of the Women, Life, Freedom protests, sparked by the [death of the Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in police custody](#) in September 2022, the world has moved on, he says.



📹 Ali and Kiana attend the Nobel peace prize ceremony on behalf of their mother, Iranian activist Narges Mohammadi, whose portrait hangs at the side of the stage, 10 December 2023. Photograph: UPI/Alamy

Iranian human rights activists inside the country say that in the past months, there has been a wave of executions and attacks on the families of those who spoke out or demonstrated against the regime. Hundreds of people are still in detention and scores more facing the death penalty for their resistance.

“We are not there but we have a responsibility to keep fighting,” says Ali. “The last time we spoke to my mother was two years ago before they cut off all her communication. I said, ‘Listen Mum, I am with you, I don’t blame you, I am proud of you.’ She wasn’t calling me to apologise, she was telling me that she’s a mother who will keep on fighting for justice. It gives me strength to carry on.”

In the past Mohammadi has spoken about the pain of putting motherhood behind her fight for justice. “I have chosen to not see my children or even hear their voices and be the voice of oppressed people, women and children, of my land,” [she told CNN last year](#).



📷 Ali with his father, Taghi, in their Paris home. Photograph: Isabelle Eshraghi/Agence VU/The Guardian

Their father Taghi Rahmani, who himself has spent 14 years imprisoned by the regime – including one year in solitary confinement – says he feels huge guilt that his children have had to suffer for their parents' work.

“The hardest thing in life is when chunks of your children growing up are taken away from you,” he says.

“I feel more sorry for Narges ... She hasn't seen the kids since they were nearly 10 years old. She talks about it in her letters that, for her, time has stopped when it comes to the kids. The last thing she remembers is the size of their slippers still being small. They were wearing children's shoes and when she meets them now she'll see them as grownups, as almost adults. She will need to get to know them again. There is so much about their lives that she doesn't know about.”

Kiana and Ali witnessed their mother's arrest as small children and spent long periods of their childhood in Iran without either parent.

“The idea of living with both our parents is very precious because for us it's very rare that it has happened,” says Ali. “When we were four, they arrested my dad and we didn't see him again for five years. Then they arrested my mum and we were alone but we've always had each other.”

Although Kiana says her father has always tried to compensate for their mother's absence, “nothing can fill the void of being without your mother”.



Ali and Kiana: 'The idea of living with both our parents is very precious because for us it's very rare that it has happened.' Photograph: Isabelle Eshraghi/Agence VU/The Guardian

“When I see my friends with their mothers, I think that could have been me with my mum, just her teaching me to put on makeup ... little things,” she says. “When I go to the mall and I see daughters having an ice-cream with their mothers I feel jealous. When I see my friends fight with their mothers, I want to say, ‘Don’t do that, you don’t understand how precious this is.’ I think, that could have been me, but my mother isn’t here.”

Ali says that the family will never stop fighting for Mohammadi’s freedom.

“My mother is the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning,” he says. “Now everything I do in my life goes towards what she is fighting for. I remember her as a child and she was always kind, always smiling. Even now, all these years later she is always in my heart. I must keep believing that I will see her again one day.”

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