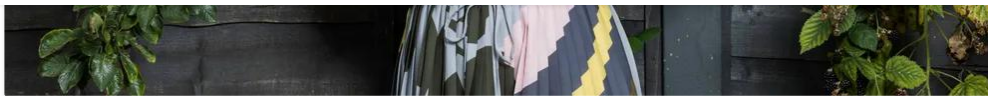




Iran > The Iran Protests One Year Later: "Like They Had Buried Me With Her"



International



Roya Piraei in London. "By the next morning, my life had changed." Foto: Andrea Artz / DER SPIEGEL

The Iran Protests One Year Later

Roya Piraei's Photo Made Her an Icon

Hundreds of protesters have likely been killed since the most recent wave of demonstrations began one year ago. The daughter of one victim cut off her hair, and the image went viral. She immediately had to leave Iran and now lives in exile in Britain.

By **Susanne Koelbl** in London

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The seventh night after her mother was killed by Iranian security forces, university student Roya Piraei posted a photo. In it, she is standing at her mother's grave dressed in black with no headscarf, her hair closely cropped. Staring directly into the camera, she is holding a bushel of hair in her left hand. She looks like a punk.



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Roya Piraei at her mother's grave. This image went viral and led to Piraei fleeing into exile. Foto: Privat

The photo was taken in fall 2022 and it immediately went viral. Women around the world, inspired by Piraei, then 24, cut off their hair to show solidarity with the protests in Iran – with the country's Generation Z as it fought desperately for its future only to be continually beat down. It is a photo that continues to inspire artists and authors today. In 2022, the BBC included Piraei on its 100 list of inspiring and influential women.

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Almost one year later, Roya Piraei is sitting in the yard of a London suburban home at a table covered with an Oriental-patterned tablecloth, a whitewashed wall behind her. She is a delicate woman with light-colored, freckled skin, her dark hair – now grown back – falling gently to her chin.

Piraei still remembers precisely what happened on that evening that destroyed her family and her life. An evening that also catapulted her into a new orbit – that of an international dissident with access to the highest circles of power.

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Like thousands of others in the country, Piraei's mother, Minoo Majidi, joined demonstrations in September 2022 to protest against Iran's despotic leadership, which forced Iranian women to wear the hijab. It was one of the largest uprisings seen since the founding of the Islamic Republic, and it was triggered by the death of the young Kurdish woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, 22.



Jina Mahsa Amini's death was the spark that unleashed the most recent wave of protests in Iran. Foto: ZUMA Wire / IMAGO

Amini died in the hospital after being arrested by the morality police because she allegedly violated the

country's rules for modest dress. According to reports, she was beaten. "Jina's death was the spark that made everything explode," Piraei says on that midday in London. (*Read more about [the life and death of Jina Mahsa Amini here](#)* 🌐.)

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Minoo Majidi was also a Kurd. The Kurds, who make up just over 10 percent of the Iranian population, are frequently the first to take to the streets when there are protests. They mostly live in western Iran, in the provinces of Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan and Hamadan – and Kermanshah, where Minoo Majidi was from and where Piraei's father still runs an engineering firm.

The majority of Kurds reject the headscarf, putting them in opposition to the government in Tehran from the start. Iranian officials and officers, meanwhile, have frequently dedicated their lives to defending the Shiite republic – with many of them feeling personally affronted by the Kurdish refusal to accept the headscarf. That is yet another factor that has made the debate so political.

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"Don't Go!"

On that September 20, an eyewitness told Roya Piraei, her mother joined demonstrators in Kermanshah, chanting the slogan "Jin! Jiyan! Azadî!" – which translates from the Kurdish as "Woman! Life! Freedom!"



Demonstrators in Tehran: "Woman! Life! Freedom!" Foto: AP / dpa

It didn't take long for the spark to turn into a raging blaze. Tens of thousands joined the protests, with the marches continuing for several weeks. According to human rights organizations, at least 522 Iranians were killed by security forces, and more than 20,000 arrested, including many minors and girls. Young Iranians were demanding an end to the Islamic Republic, chanting things like "Death to the Dictator!" – referring to the aging Revolutionary Leader Ali Khamenei, who has ruled the country for the last 34 years.

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"Don't go," Piraei's father told his wife. "It's dangerous." She responded: "If we don't both go, then the young people will go, and they will be killed."

She had experienced all too often how the regime reacts when it is put under pressure. In the last 40 years, countless numbers of embittered Iranians have left the country in successive waves. The first exodus came in the late 1980s following the execution of thousands of regime critics. In the 1990s, the secret service then kidnapped dozens of critical artists and intellectuals before murdering them. In 2009, the people of Iran took to the streets to protest the apparently falsified re-election of hardliner President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Dozens of demonstrators were killed, with thousands being thrown in prison and tortured.

Since then, the intervals between popular uprisings have grown shorter and shorter. In the winter of 2017-2018, it was the workers who revolted, protesting against high fuel and food prices – and against the fact that they were no longer receiving their wages. The demonstrators set fire to banks and government buildings. Today, 60 percent of the Iranian population lives below the poverty line.

In 2019, the protests escalated into Bloody November, with the regime's henchmen and thugs again going after its critics with the utmost severity. According to the news agency Reuters, some 1,500 people were killed.

Almost Point-Blank Range

"Don't go." Those were the last words Roya Piraei's father uttered to her mother. Since then, the family has done its best to reconstruct exactly how Minoo Majidi died. They have spoken witnesses, talked to hospital staff and watched amateur videos.

It was already dark, approaching 8 p.m., when a member of the security forces shot at protesters – from the back of a motorcycle say witnesses – at one of the busiest intersections in the city of Kermanshah. He reportedly hit Minoo Majidi at almost point-blank range.

A close-up video shows Roya Piraei's mother being carried unconscious into a white vehicle. She died on the way to the hospital. Pathologists counted 167 pieces of shot in her back.



Roya Piraei with her mother Minoo Majid (center), her sister Masha and her niece Rosa. Foto: Privat

Roya Piraei concentrates as she speaks, her slender white fingertips lying next to each other on the table. The late summer sun is shining into her pale face. Piraei only rarely wears makeup anymore, saying she has lost her pleasure in such things. She used to exercise together with her mother and enjoyed meeting friends when they came over for a meal with her parents, which was a frequent occurrence. Now, she says, she only rarely leaves the house.

When her mother was buried two days after her death, a Thursday, Piraei says she felt as though her own life were being extinguished. "As if they had buried me together with her."

Her body was numb with pain, she recalls. "I sat in my room for days, just staring into space. And then I had this impulse." Piraei bundles her hair together and gestures with her fingers like a pair of scissors. "I screamed and cried until papa burst in and tore the scissors out of my hand."

"I screamed and cried until papa burst in and tore the scissors out of my hand."

Roya Piraei

By then, though, it was too late. Her dark curls already lay on the floor.

No Longer Safe at Home

In Persia, cutting off one's hair was an act of protest, and among the Kurds, laying one's own hair on the grave of the deceased is a common gesture of mourning.

One week after her mother's death, Roya Piraei's photo circled the globe overnight. "By the next morning, my life had changed." She felt she was being watched, and no longer felt safe at home.

Piraei says she began experiencing anxiety attacks and feared she would never again be able to rouse herself from her state of numbness. Her father, her brother and her sister, who is 10 years her senior, were worried that the authorities would soon raid their home and arrest Piraei.

They decided that she had to leave as quickly as possible. The family arranged for her to travel to Tehran, 500 kilometers away, with a relative driving her there by car. Her older sister had established contact to opposition activists in exile to ensure that someone would take care of Piraei abroad.

Six weeks later, Piraei found herself in Paris, standing amid expensive carpets and crystal chandeliers in the office of French President Emmanuel Macron. The French leader received several Iranian activists for personal talks in the Élysée Palace, and in the press photo released after the meeting, Macron is seen holding Piraei's hand. He was the first Western leader to call the opposition movement a "revolution." Piraei says that Macron was genuinely interested and asked what he could do for her. "Stop shaking hands with my mother's murderers," she says she told him. He then ensured her that he was on her side, but about the revolution, he said they "had to do it yourselves."

"The support from Macron was good for me," says Piraei. And it infuriated the regime in Iran. A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Tehran fulminated the next day that Macron's meeting with the dissidents was "a flagrant violation of France's international responsibilities in the fight against terrorism and violence."

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Three weeks later, Hollywood star Angelina Jolie also got in touch with Piraei. "What was your mom like," the actress asked Piraei in an interview for the YouTube channel of *Time* magazine. "Angelina still sometimes calls," says Piraei.

Different Visions of Iran's Future

The death of 62-year-old Minoo Majidi and 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini once again demonstrated to the world just how merciless the regime in Tehran is in its efforts to keep the population down. It is precisely such images that unite the majority of Iranians against their rulers. Whether its older Iranians, who still remember the Shah, workers who are fed up with endemic corruption, or the young who refuse to be patronized any longer – they all want a different Iran, even if they have different visions of what it should be. What is certain, however, is that this regime has lost the support of Iranian citizens, and thus its legitimacy.

"The leadership circle knows everything about the sociopolitical dynamics in the country."

Political scientist Adnan Tabatabai

The leadership in Tehran is acutely aware of the extent of the dissatisfaction, says Bonn-based political scientist Adnan Tabatabai, from the Bonn-based Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO). "The leadership circle knows everything about the sociopolitical dynamics in the country."

But politicians in Iran, he says, don't make policy for the majority, rather for their own clientele, a minority of around 15 to 20 percent of loyal supporters. Along with the leadership elite, this group also includes state employees, security personnel, business leaders and a few dozen particularly influential clerics.



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other Iranian leaders during a visit to the police academy in Tehran in October 2022. Foto: Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader / AP

How, though, does this equation – with the dwindling number of defenders of the Islamic Republic on the one hand, and the steadily growing opposition, on the other – work on long term? Many children of the wealthy study outside of Iran in some of the world's best universities. And most assets are invested internationally.

The government, says Tabatabai, responds to each wave of opposition with a new version of an old narrative for less affluent supporters, according to which the protests in Iran are always triggered and controlled by enemies abroad, and must therefore be quelled with maximum severity. Otherwise, so the story goes, Iran risks experiencing the same fate as Syria, Libya and Iraq.

Can a Revolution in Iran Ever Succeed?

The result is that it hasn't been possible over the course of several decades to topple the theocracy in Tehran. A real revolution, observers say, would require far more than just courageous people taking to the streets. Turning out the current regime would need extensive preparations, support from internal regime collaborators, able personnel, an exceptional leader and the competence to take over control of a state of 90 million people that is armed to the teeth and extends over an area almost five times the size of Germany.

There is, counter dissidents, no lack of political talent. The prisons of Iran, they point out, are full of able leaders who could guide the country into a better future. Furthermore, in recent months opposition groups in exile – which have long been at each other's

throats – have even begun cooperating for the first time. Thus far, though, every uprising has failed in the face of the regime's violent response.

"Might makes right," says Roya Piraei. She sets the table for lunch on the Oriental tablecloth as her British friend brings salad, tea and biscuits.

Roya Piraei has now also become one of the opposition activists in exile who can no longer return home out of fear of immediately being arrested. She didn't last long in Paris, and she is only in London for a visit. She has withdrawn to a town in the north of England where her sister has lived for a number of years. Piraei has submitted an asylum application and believes she will soon receive a positive response.

Roya Piraei with her older sister Masha during a visit to London. "At least I've started talking again."
Foto: Andrea Artz / DER SPIEGEL

Still, she's not doing particularly well. She says she feels cut off from the world. In the first five weeks after she left Iran, she says she hardly spoke a single word. In the mornings, she didn't even bother to get out of bed. "At least I've started talking again," says Piraei with a smile as she smooths her pleated skirt.

"I've aged in my heart this year," she says. All those who have supported her to this point have returned to their lives: Her friends in Paris, along with Macron and Angelina Jolie.

But not her. The life she once had no longer exists. **5**

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