

# 'We have only us and our God to rely on' - Prof. Setareh Sadeghi on Iran's fight

Setareh Sadeghi, professor of World Studies at the University of Tehran, speaks to The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal from Isfahan, Iran as her country defends itself against a vicious combined assault by the US and Israeli militaries. Sadeghi addresses the teachings and legacies of the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and explains how his assassination has galvanized the Shia masses and united Iran in a battle for its national integrity. Support The Grayzone: <https://thegrayzone.com/support/> ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> #TheGrayzone

## #Max

The U.S.-Israeli war on Iran began on February 28th with Israel's assassination of Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The purpose of that attack—to trigger a collapse of Iran's ruling system and a swift path to regime change—has not only failed, it's produced a stunning backlash.

## #Speaker 1

Thank you.

## #Max

Millions of Iranians have filled the streets across the country, often while under bombardment, to mourn Khamenei, to express their defiance against the U.S. and Israeli war machine, and to call on their armed forces to confront their attackers. The Grayzone spoke with Sitara Sadeghi, a professor of world studies at the University of Tehran, to better understand the resilience of the Islamic Republic after Khamenei, and where Iran goes as it faces a war for its very existence. Iran is under heavy bombardment, particularly Tehran. As expected, this assault on Iran began with decapitation strikes targeting the country's leadership, specifically its foremost leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. I want you to address that first—the meaning of the martyrdom of Ali Khamenei to the Iranian people, to supporters of the Islamic Republic, and what you think the political repercussions will be.

## #Setareh Sadeqi

Well, it's both difficult and very important to talk about the assassination and martyrdom of Imam Sayyid Ali Khamenei, who had been the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic for

a few decades after the passing of the legendary Imam Khomeini, who founded the Islamic Republic. Both figures were very charismatic. I'm sure you, and probably a lot of your audience, know that the funeral for Imam Khomeini in Tehran in the 1980s, and then the funeral for General Qasem Soleimani, were recorded as the largest funerals ever in modern history. You can imagine that once there is an actual funeral for Imam Khamenei inside Iran, how massive that would be, because he is definitely the most popular political and spiritual leader in Iran. It was a great loss, and it was with shock, anger, and grief that people received the news of his passing.

But even among those who were not big fans, or who didn't really adhere to the Shia ideology where his significance is more emphasized, people understood that he was the strong glue that held the country together during very critical times and through every crisis we've faced—despite sanctions, war, terrorist attacks, assassinations, internal conflicts, and so on. He was the one who kept the country united and made it possible for people to rally behind a flag and stay strong.

So while it feels very devastating to hear the news that this pillar, this unifying figure, has been taken out—this ideology that many in Iran aspire to—but also, if you come from an anti-imperialist stance, you understand that he was one of the only politicians in the region who stood very strong in the face of aggression, sanctions, and all sorts of hostility coming from the U.S. and its military base in the region, which is Israel. Um, for a lot of us, it's—well, we take pride in martyrdom, because none of us can prevent their deaths, and that's how he would always put it. Like every human being will eventually die, and what death is better than dying while you are fighting, while you are working bravely, and not fleeing? Not like what everyone in the Western media and the anti-Iranian camp were saying—that he's on the 44th floor underground, or in a bunker, or that he's fled to Russia or is going to flee to Venezuela. Back during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, you know, all these rumors we heard that he was going to flee somewhere and save his life. But he stood there, even though he knew there was a chance he would be assassinated. And he was martyred alongside his wife, his children, his grandchildren. But he knew very well how to lay out a plan for the country after this happened.

And that's what the current officials of Iran are acting on. This is a great sacrifice that Iran has made in order to keep fighting evil. We're fighting a war on the Epstein class of pedophiles and cannibals—people who kill children all day, then rape them on their breaks, and eat human flesh in their satanic rituals. So we're not fighting this only for Iran; we're fighting it for the entire world, for anyone who wants to see that there is still one power, one government, one country in the world that does not surrender, does not capitulate, and stands strong in the face of all aggression. And that's our way of exposing the paper tiger, because we're seeing the images coming from U.S. bases in the region, right? So that shows you where Iran stands.

## **#Max**

So, Ali Khamenei was 87 years old. He was nearing the end of his life. There's this viral clip circulating of a young boy asking what he should be when he grows up, and the leader tells him,

“You should live a virtuous, good life. And then, when you’re in your 70s or 80s, you could hope to be martyred.” Exactly.

## **#Speaker 1**

Jonah, I'm ashamed of myself.

## **#Speaker 04**

So, there’s a perspective I keep hearing—that this war was expected.

## **#Max**

There was no surprise that Israel attacked when it did, and that he simply chose to remain in his office and accept his fate, knowing his martyrdom would electrify the Shia masses—as we've seen spreading all the way into India. What do you think of that perspective?

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

Well, I think he always had this outlook on life and on martyrdom—just like any devout Shia believer—that when it’s time to die, it will happen, and nobody can prevent it. And if it’s not the time, it won’t happen, no matter how hard they try. He survived an assassination attempt and a bombing in the 1980s that took the lives of many Iranian officials, carried out by the notorious MEK terrorist group. He survived that, and that’s how his right arm was disabled as a result of the attack. So I think this wasn’t the first time he knew an attempt on his life was happening.

So it was his manner and his outlook on life all throughout these years that he’d been fighting and representing Iran as the leader, the top official, and the commander in chief. I think that’s true, because he was very careful with the security protocols. He would follow up and trust his bodyguards and the people around him, but he never wanted to leave the battlefield—which, in this case, was his own house and his office—where he kept a very disciplined routine of staying informed and following what was happening in the country. I think there’s definitely truth to that: he probably knew it could happen, but he didn’t want to leave.

He did not fear being martyred by the most evil forces in the world. That was something he took pride in. He was sure that when you’re on the right side of history, on the right side of humanity, standing for what is right, that’s what matters. You could also see that in Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s manner, or in Yahya Sinwar’s—that determination to fight, to either become martyrs or to gain victory. In his case, because he left behind a legacy of fighting and not surrendering, it’s not about him being the most important or charismatic figure in this struggle. It’s that the ideology—the mentality of continuing the fight—is still there.

And people will take on the fight and keep fighting. As he said, this is exactly what will bring Iranians together—but not only Iranians, also the entire Muslim community in the region. You're seeing people coming out into the streets to support Iran and to show their objection to the assassination of Imam Khamenei—in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan, India, the occupied territories, and Kashmir. In Lebanon too, this is happening across the region. And I'm sure he knew that's what would happen after his martyrdom.

## **#Max**

Well, large masses of people are out mourning the martyrdom—or assassination—of Ali Khamenei. And for the first time, I'm seeing U.S. corporate media forced to acknowledge that there is a popular base for the Islamic Republic because of these outpourings of mourning and outrage. However, he's also possibly the most demonized figure in the world. And before him, Khomeini—I remember, even as a small boy, the demonization of the Ayatollah.

I mean, one of my earliest memories is watching TV and seeing him being, you know, identified as the world's foremost evildoer. They're both portrayed in the West as these extremely repressive, austere figures who have no tolerance. Yet there's this deep reverence for them that I saw in Iran, talking to ordinary people—including young women like yourself—who have achieved a lot in life within Iranian society. What is it about Iran, the ideology he preached, his teachings, his books, and his life that inspired so many supporters of the Islamic Republic and ordinary Iranians?

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

Well, I think before talking about why he was very popular inside Iran—and, of course, outside Iran—I should say, first of all, that Iranians, especially during the first years after the revolution, when the Western media propaganda was not as massive as it is now, were not really consumers of that propaganda. For a long time before the Internet and satellite channels started bombarding us 24/7 with content trying to make us believe that he was not a popular leader, or to demonize him, people in Iran saw things differently. Living in Iran and seeing what he had done for his country—he fought in the war against Saddam. He wasn't just sitting in his office; he would go to the battlefields, dress up as a fighter.

His own children would do that. There are images from Iran showing his house, which was targeted by U.S. and Israeli airstrikes. He lived a very humble life—no luxury, no fancy house. He didn't even have many carpets, which are very common in Persian homes, because he wanted to live like the poorest in the country. That brings respect for you as a leader. He also lived by morals that any human being would admire. He was a very enthusiastic reader from a young age. He had read many different books and encouraged people to read. He had read all sorts of European and American novels, even.

## **#Max**

Yeah, *\*Les Misérables\** was one of his favorite books by Victor Hugo. Exactly.

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

Exactly. Yeah, and there's another four-volume novel that he read, about the First World War—I think it's called *\*The Thiebaud Family\**, if I'm not mistaken. He read many different authors and had a real interest in culture and music. He had, like, any—well, you know, talking about a cleric and the demonization and propaganda they've put out about Muslim clerics—you wouldn't expect that. But his commentary on even Western music is amazing. He knows classical Western music; he compares it with Persian and Eastern music. He was also a great poet—he has books of poetry. He was very well read in world history, but also in the history of Iran and the region. And he was a strong advocate for women's rights.

His speech on women's rights was something I would always bring up when arguing with people who claimed to come from a religious point of view but wanted to block women from reaching certain positions. I would always refer to his speech where he talked about equal rights for women and encouraged them to become a significant part of society. Growing up, reading his speeches or listening to his commentary was very inspiring. He was the force that united Iranians from across the political spectrum in defending the country. And he never wanted a luxurious, safe life for himself while sending other people to the battlefield to be killed, just so he could enjoy comfort.

He defended Iran and stood for Iran, protecting it with everything he had. And as we saw, even members of his family were killed in the Zionist regime's attacks on Iran. I think now, with alternative media and social media, people are hearing the other side of the story. It's not as easy to demonize him anymore—or Imam Khomeini—because there's ample evidence out there showing what he stood for. When you see that it's the Zionist regime, the same people involved in corruption and exploitation, attacking him while he's the one resisting and fighting back, it becomes pretty clear who's on the right side and who's not.

Even in the region, the heads of some Arab states, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have been mentioned in the Epstein files. They have no grace. They have nothing to defend their own countries or their own people. If, for example, Iran decided to attack U.S. bases there, or the U.S. decided to attack those countries, they would have nothing to defend themselves or protect the lives of their citizens.

But Ayatollah Khamenei formed a very strong army that defended Iranians—the lives of Iranians. I mean, Imam Khomeini laid the foundation, but Khamenei contributed to it, and together they built a strong army capable of defending Iran and its borders. Just remember, during Saddam's invasion of Iran—Saddam, by the way, was supported and armed by the U.S. and many European states—we had just come out of a revolution. We had a traitor prime minister, and there were a lot of terrorist

attacks that took the lives of our politicians. And still, we did not lose even an inch of our soil or our sovereignty. This was because of the ideology we had, because we refused to capitulate or surrender to any foreign power. That's exactly what he established in the country. You can see it, for example, in the military commanders, the IRGC commanders, who followed him and sacrificed their own lives to protect Iran.

## **#Max**

Well, the anti-imperialist history of Ali Khamenei is buried beneath this demonization. It's a history Nelson Mandela would be familiar with—and probably why Mandela was listed as a terrorist in the U. S. until, I think, 1991. Obviously, the Palestinians understand this history as well. But this is a kind of political education we're not exposed to in the West, in the United States. The framing—or framework—for understanding the Ayatollah or the clerical leadership of Iran is reduced to forcing women to wear the hijab, the mandatory hijab. And then you see these trashy memes and AI slop on Twitter, showing women in bikinis celebrating, or even animated women basically beating the Ayatollah in bikinis—sort of like OnlyFans-style performative gestures to celebrate his death as a form of women's liberation, like liberation through assassination by Israel.

And there are big marches here in Washington, where I am—in Georgetown, the wealthiest district—by the local Persian community, celebrating these assassinations. And, you know, it's something you don't see on the anti-war side: celebrations of death. It just seems like a strange culture to many outsiders. What's your reaction to the celebration by so many people who come from Iran, of this wave of assassinations, and particularly that of the late leader?

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

Well, I think part of the Iranian diaspora, and also a minority inside Iran, have been brainwashed. I mean, the anti-Iran campaign and the demonization of the Iranian government is no joke—it's like 24 /7 bombardment with propaganda that wants you to think you're living in the worst country possible. You don't have freedom, you don't have anything, when in fact you're actually enjoying one of the best healthcare systems and free education. And, I mean, you've been to Iran. A lot of people have seen that we've been living under sanctions for decades, and still we're a country that manages. We're very self-sufficient and self-reliant, and we're producing food—doing a lot of things ourselves.

But there's also a big part of this, I would say, really sick and twisted Iranian diaspora that comes from the rich families associated with the Pahlavi family—the previous monarch who was toppled by the Iranian popular revolution. They fled the country with people's money and built a lifetime of luxury for themselves in the U.S. And of course, they're going to call for the bombing of Iranians and cheer the assassination of the Iranian leader, because they've never lived here, or they've been so detached from the realities on the ground that they have no idea what's happening. Sometimes they

really don't know, because, as I said, they've been detached. Sometimes they want to fuel this fear—very orientalist and colonial tropes about Iran, for example, that women are oppressed, that women have no rights.

I've even seen people saying, for example, you know, the orientalist trope—which is totally a lie—about the 72 virgins after martyrdom, or that girls aren't allowed to go to school. When in fact, in Iran, more than 70% of university students are women, and women make up a significant portion of society in different positions. Or, for example, that the majority of women before the revolution, during the Pahlavi era, were illiterate—like the majority of society—but it was more significant for women. And if you even compare Iran's situation during the Pahlavi period, before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, to the countries around us, like Iraq, Qatar, or Bahrain, we had a life expectancy lower than all of them.

We had a literacy rate much lower than all those countries. So they don't want to acknowledge that the Islamic Republic actually brought freedom for women, because there were a lot of women who had been Muslim for more than a thousand years. The Islamic Republic didn't bring us Islam—we were already Muslim, and we wanted to practice our own culture. Even the Pahlavi family, if you look at their names, they all have Muslim names. They would, for example, go to the shrine as a way of showing respect or winning public opinion. So they want you to think it was the Islamic Republic that forced Islam on Iranians, when in fact Iranians have been Muslim for thousands of years.

Our history, even our beautiful architecture—for example, if you go to Isfahan—it's Islamic architecture that was established during the Safavid era, more than 400 years ago. We take pride in our Islamic heritage, but also in our Iranian heritage. Iran has combined traditional Iranian culture with Islamic culture very well, and we've wanted to live up to those values. We didn't want to be Westernized or modernized in the way Reza Pahlavi, the first Pahlavi dictator, tried to force on us—by pulling off women's hijabs and chadors in the streets and forcing them to stay at home.

Because for these women, it was either, "I'm going to be in society with my hijab," or, "If you're going to force me not to wear my hijab, I'll just have to stay at home." And that meant I wouldn't get an education, I wouldn't be able to be part of society. They resisted that. So for a lot of us, it was about getting free from imperialist power—it was being liberated from what was being imposed on us as a so-called modernized culture. And with modernization, the Pahlavi dictator didn't bring anything in terms of technology or education; it was only the dress code he wanted to change, so that people would look like what he had seen in the West during his luxurious trips.

So they want to eliminate that part of Iran's history and present it as if the Islamic Republic wanted to impose Islam on Iranians, when in fact the majority were already Muslim. They want to steal the practice of religion, even though it's been part of society and people are living up to it. But also, I

think anyone seeing these people cheering when bombs are being dropped on citizens in Tehran can tell where they stand. If any of them had family or friends living in Iran, they would never cheer while watching bombs fall on residential areas in Tehran and other cities.

A lot of cities have been targeted. In Minab, 165 schoolgirls were massacred in the strike. How is that liberation? It's really interesting, and it exposes the nature of the Epstein regime in the U.S. and in Israel. They started by killing them—the first massacre was the killing of 165 schoolgirls. Then they attacked Gandhi Hospital in Tehran, where there were embryo tanks that had to be urgently transferred to other hospitals to save lives. There were people lying in hospital beds who were targeted. Playgrounds are being targeted in Tehran.

Schools are being targeted in Tehran and other cities. It's like they really enjoy killing children. And as I said, just look at the Epstein files—they've been raping children and eating embryos in their satanic rituals, and now they're targeting children in schools, exactly like what they did in Gaza. The majority of the casualties among the hundreds of thousands of people killed during the genocide in Gaza were children and women. What does that tell you about the regime that's attacking us? We've seen the history of "liberation" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—it's just permanent chaos. And they thought that because of the riots and protests we had in January, if they started carpet-bombing Tehran, people would pour into the streets and cheer, "Yeah, bomb us and give us freedom," when in fact, that didn't happen.

I mean, U.S. officials are now admitting that regime change is not going to happen. It's not going to be as easy as in other places because we do have a strong army. And Ayatollah Khamenei has a very strong popular position in society, so it's going to be a very difficult job for them to do, even if they use their B-2 bombers or, I don't know, all sorts of massacres they've been carrying out. It's different, because in Palestine and in Gaza, they want the people of the world to see Palestinians and the people in Gaza as the victims who were killed and massacred at the hands of the invincible Israeli army.

And there's no coherent country with a strong army that can defend these people. But you can't do the same to Iran. We are one country of over 90 million people, with a size probably 70 times larger than the occupied territories in Palestine. So it's going to be a very difficult job. And we're not posing as victims—we're posing as fighters. We take pride in fighting the pedophiles and the war criminals. I mean, the U.S., with Trump as the head of the U.S. regime—the pedophile cannibal—and Netanyahu as the head of the Zionist regime, both have cases of genocide going on in the International Criminal Court. So these are the people we're standing up to.

These are the people who have been attacking us—like the most evil characters from any Hollywood fantasy of satanism you can imagine. They're the ones attacking us. So I think it's very clear to the world where we stand. I'm getting messages from my friends in Europe, Latin America, and even some people in the U.S. saying, "You're fighting this war on behalf of the world. It's not only for you, and we are with you." I mean, their governments might be compromised, but the people understand

what's happening. And this is a war that will change everything. Eventually, it will probably change the world order, and at least the entire region—and how everything else is going to be laid out in the future.

## **#Max**

What's been the reaction of your family and the people you know to the violence being imposed on Iran? I saw news today that Israel carried out a double-tap strike in the center of Tehran, targeting a rescue crew. As you mentioned, hospitals are under attack, there was a massacre of young girls at a school, and a female volleyball team was killed during a match. It's starting to look like the kind of Gaza-style violence that deliberately targets civilians. How are people reacting? Because you had that period during the 12-day war when there was a rally-around-the-flag effect—many Iranians who didn't have a revolutionary political education and were more middle class saw the violence of the Israeli-U.S. coalition for the first time, targeting their neighbors, killing them in their apartments. Then you had that period of polarization following the protests and the riots on January 8th and 9th, which seemed to undercut that unity. How is society responding now, based on your own experience, since you're in Isfahan?

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

I mean, because it's been only two days, even though everything has been happening so fast, I think people are still trying to process it. But I've heard from a lot of my friends and family members who were big fans of Ayatollah Khamenei—they're devastated. They're saying it feels like losing their own father, if not worse. I've lost my father, and I feel the pain is just as deep. But they're also very hopeful that something good will eventually come out of it, even though we're all worried about what's going to unfold in the coming weeks.

But I've also talked to people who weren't necessarily big fans of Ayatollah Khamenei, but they understood that his leadership was essential to Iran's unity. They're worried that what's going to unfold might lead to a kind of balkanization of the country, because we're hearing that the borders with Iraq, with Iraqi Kurdistan, and other areas are being targeted. At least 20 border security guards have been killed. Towns along the border are being bombed. And we've also heard that, if I'm not mistaken, about 11,000 ISIS prisoners have been moved from Syria to Iraq.

And I think the US and Israel are planning to keep them there. So if there's a chance for them to unleash terror and death cults inside Iran to destabilize the government, they'll do it. But so far, we've been pushing back against this. Still, there's concern about where this is going to lead. I've talked to friends who say, no, we have a strong army, and the leader has very clearly and in detail laid out a plan for what to do and what's going to happen afterward. And we're going to win this war. It's going to be a very difficult war.

It's already been— I mean, we're seeing devastating attacks on residential areas in Tehran and other cities, and they're really, really horrible. But we're hopeful that we'll come out of it. We're going to defend our country, and it feels like all our red lines have already been breached. So this is an existential war we're fighting. We're going to fight until our last breath. That's how a lot of people I've talked to feel. What else do we have to lose? It's Iran. We want to fight until our last breath to defend our country and its sovereignty. It's not about one person.

It's about the integrity and sovereignty of our country. We'll have to wait and see what exactly unfolds over the next few days. But even on social media, I'm seeing people who used to say they weren't really fans of Ayatollah Khamenei now realizing what an important and significant role he's played in unifying the country. Now they want to join the camp, to be on this side. And if you attend the massive gatherings happening in Tehran and Isfahan, you'll see people from all walks of life— women without hijab, or with very loose hijab, and very conservative ones too.

It's a variety of people coming from different political spectrums, from different religious beliefs, and they're supporting the unity of their country. Because right now, it's all about the integrity of our country—our infrastructure is being targeted, our population is being targeted—and we know that the enemy targeting us has massacred hundreds of thousands of people in Gaza. The international community isn't going to do anything, so we have only ourselves and our God to rely on in fighting this battle. But we will fight this battle.

And I believe there will be victory. As I said, in our beliefs, we will either be martyred or we will be victorious—and for us, both situations are wins. Because we're not going to capitulate, we're not going to surrender. This is exactly what Imam Khamenei, in his last speech, laid out and advised us: that people like us, like Iranians, with thousands of years of civilization and a very rich history and culture, are not going to surrender to someone like the US or Israel. So we're not going to surrender. We'll fight as long as we can.

## **#Max**

The words "Give me liberty or give me death" were spoken by Patrick Henry in 1775 during the American Revolution. And it sounds like you're saying something similar, as Iran fights what seems like an existential war to maintain its independence from Western empire and Israeli hegemony. Is there anything you'd like to add before we close this latest conversation?

## **#Setareh Sadeqi**

No, I just want to thank you for this conversation. I also want to add that, as I said, there's a really sick and twisted part of the Iranian diaspora that cheers our death. It's not only the death of our leader—it's the deaths of hundreds of Iranian schoolchildren and innocent people. But they do not represent us. They're not our voice. No Iranian, no sane human being, would cheer the bombing of

their own country. No foreign intervention in history has ever saved any nation, and we're not going to be an exception.

We're proud of that—fighting the battle that we're fighting. And as you said, I mean, there are many leaders... this is another war against colonialism and imperialism that we're fighting. People in Africa, people in Latin America, people in Asia understand what it's about. They understand what independence and freedom mean, and what their value is. They understand that it takes a huge sacrifice to achieve that, but we're willing to make sacrifices to safeguard our freedom and the independence we've enjoyed for 37 years. We want to make sure we'll celebrate our Independence Day for many more years to come.