

CULTURE

How the Iranian Diaspora Collective Is Fighting to Amplify Voices on the Ground

BY EMMA SPECTER
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A recent IDC action involved devoting a Times Square billboard to the ongoing unrest in Iran. Photo: Courtesy of IDC.

The protests in Iran that were sparked by the death of [Maha Amini](#) earlier this year are still ongoing, but the initial interest from Western media has quieted somewhat in recent months, leaving protesting Iranians—and many across the Iranian diaspora who hope to amplify the protesters' message—at a loss for how to express to the world the severity of their suffering. Just this week, the Islamic Republic executed [23-year-old protester Mohsen Shekar](#).

These are the circumstances that helped form the [Iranian Diaspora Collective \(IDC\)](#), a nonpartisan, multi-faith group that aims to spread accurate, on-the-ground information about what's currently going on in Iran. The organization—which was formed by [Mandy Ansari](#), [Faraz Dadashi](#), [Mej Mahdara](#), [Nicolete Mason](#) and [Raya Rastegar](#)—encourages its followers to diversify their media diets and take note of upcoming actions like [the UN's vote](#) to remove the Islamic Republic from the Commission on the Status of Women, which is scheduled for December 14.

Recently, Vogue spoke to two founding members of the IDC—Mahdara and Mason—about their organization's mission, how it feels for them to watch what's going on in Iran from the US, and the urgent need for more Western media to pay attention to Iranian dissent and strife. [Read the full interview below.](#)

Vogues First off, how does it feel to watch the news coming out of Iran while you're far away?

Mej Mahdara: I'm homesick and deeply sad. Grief is probably the best word to describe it, but my IDC cofounders have been so incredibly helpful; the camaraderie and banter between us is fantastic.

Do you have thoughts on how people in the US can stay better informed about what's going on in Iran right now?

Nicolete Mason: I think as much as this is a tactical war between the Islamic Republic and Iranians on the ground in Iran, it's even more so an information war. The Islamic Republic has taken great lengths to limit communication tools and access to communication for people in Iran, and that applies, of course, to the journalism practices of a huge portion of the people who have been detained. In the last three months since this uprising started happening, Instagram and Twitter were shut down under the Islamic Republic. It's very hard to access the internet unless you're using a loophole like Starlink or a VPN service, which are not legal in Iran. The way most people are able to access the internet is through VPN tools right now, so one of the things that have been really important for people in the diaspora is to be the voice of the people in Iran and kind of act as a megaphone. One of the ways that we have done that is by [following citizen journalists](#) and people who are really on the ground there. There is an immense cost and risk for anyone communicating with people outside of Iran, and because of that, I think it's even more important for us to actually listen to what is being said and to amplify and share and broaden the reach of their messages.

What has it felt like to see news about Iran disseminated that isn't always well sourced or rigorously fact-checked?

Mahdara: Well, I think that the elephant in the room is the bias and the trauma of dealing with, like, 43 years of a country waging war against the West and specifically America. The Iranian government is sort of relying on the ignorance and the lack of understanding of the West to continue to push their propaganda, and the longer they're allowed to push their propaganda, the longer the Iranian people are living in a hostage state, right? That's why it's crucial that [our living document](#) has had over 45,000 people view it; there's such a thirst for an actual Iranian American or Iranian Western groups to come forward to essentially be like, "We're Americans, and some of us are Europeans, but we're all also ethnically Iranian."

The internal bias and internal trauma that we have from the West—this is what the Islamic Republic has been counting on to keep Iran isolated so that they can conduct their crimes against humanity, so that they can conduct their crimes against women, so they can continue to conduct their gender-based sexual crimes and oppress millions of people. Right now, if you said, "You guys can go anywhere you want," I guarantee that probably 60 or 70% of the population would just run over the border to get out of there because they're living in a failed state. They're living in a dictatorship, and really, who wants to be ruled by Putin? Who wants to be ruled by the ayatollahs? That's why the IDC exists.

Is there anything you'd like to see change in Western reporting on Iran?

Mahdara: We are desperately trying to get opportunities for op-eds and get more surrogates in traditional media to invite Iranians in the diaspora to be at large and to contribute their voices. There has never been a moment where citizen journalism and citizen amplification and social media has been used more to move humanity forward, and you guys are now seeing the brilliance of who the Iranian people are. They're artists, creatives, chefs, dancers, singers. They're all these things that no one here—including us—even knew because they have been sealed behind a communication wall. There's a trend going globally here, if you look at what's going on in China or Russia. People are stepping forward and are willing to die in order to have an alternative to what is made possible by these oppressive, dictatorial societies.

How have the Iranian protests and ensuing governmental human-rights crackdowns impacted your lives as members of the Iranian diaspora?

Mahdara: Well, if you look at our social media feeds, they've gone from us sharing our lives as entrepreneurs and influencers and investors to... I mean, if you looked at our feeds right now, they literally look like bloodbaths because we're not getting enough news coverage of this human-rights crisis. I mean, the 90,000 people taken in the past three months—where are they? Who are they? What's their status? What's their medical condition? Can we send in human-rights attorneys or humanitarian aid? What do you do when these people are literally living under the most horrid and awful conditions?

Mason: I do think there's also this immense sense of duty and responsibility for those of us who live in the West. I've never been to Iran; my family were refugees who left during the revolution, and because we're religious minorities under the Islamic Republic, it's never been safe for my family to return. I've never been able to go there. As all this started, there was this feeling of longing and yearning for a homeland I've never been to, and I think it's very common for displaced people to have this experience of being without a home and without a homeland. It's never even been in the realm of possibility that I could reconnect with Iran or have a connection with Iran or go there and be in the city where my mom grew up. I have generations upon generations of familial history there, and for the first time, with this movement, it feels like, *actually, this might be a possibility.*

I think that hope and bit of optimism is very much coming from the youth of Iran, queer people in Iran, ethnic minorities in Iran; this is a very intersectional movement. It is a women's movement, but it's also a movement for ethnic minorities and religious minorities and sexual minorities, and out of this, there has been this turning point of, okay, the people there want change, they're going to great lengths to create content to disseminate to the world—at such enormous risk and cost—to communicate with us what they need and what they want. It really called us all in to pivot our lives to quite an extreme extent in order to support that effort, and do it willingly and happily, because we know how important it is. I think we all have this really intimate understanding that a free Iran is not just good for Iranians, it's good for the whole world. There's such enormous talent and resources and brilliant minds and art and culture that have been taken hostage for 43 years, and to be able to have people in Iran be the victors of their own freedom and liberation is truly a gift not just to the region, not just to the Middle East, but to everyone.

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