

NINA MOINI: Tensions are growing in the Middle East, as the war between Israel and Iran enters its second week. Over the weekend, the US inserted itself into the war, launching a series of coordinated bombing attacks against three Iranian nuclear facilities. It's a major escalation of the ongoing Middle East conflict.

As the war continues, many Iranians here in Minnesota have been keeping a close eye on the conflict. Parham Alaei is Cofounder of the Minnesota Committee in Support of a Democratic Iran. He's on the line now. Thank you very much for coming on *Minnesota Now* today, Parham.

PARHAM ALAEI: Good afternoon, Nina. Thank you for the invitation.

NINA MOINI: If you would like to share, what was your reaction when Israel first launched its surprise attacks?

PARHAM ALAEI: Sure. I mean, we were-- I mean, it was, of course, a surprise, but it was not unexpected. We were expecting that it will come to this after so many years of the Iranian regime building up its nuclear arsenal and, again, sowing disability-- not disability, sowing instability in the region. So we were expecting it would come to this point. But we didn't know, of course, it would happen last week, because they were, obviously, negotiating at that point.

NINA MOINI: And then when you heard that the United States got involved, then how did you feel?

PARHAM ALAEI: Well, again, we felt that-- I mean, again, it was not unexpected. But again, we feared that this would happen. And it causes more-- again, more conflict in the region. And of course, we all have families and friends in Iran. We are concerned about them. And so again, it was another escalation that, again, we didn't hope it would happen, but it did happen.

NINA MOINI: There has been a long-standing conflict between Israel and Iran, to your point. Does this moment feel different in any way? What are you concerned about?

PARHAM ALAEI: Well, our concern, first and foremost, is for the Iranian people who are caught in between the two warring governments, essentially. So they are innocent bystanders that had no part in this conflict. And they didn't wish for this. But then, again, it came to this point in time. And on top of that, again today, there was an attack on the Evin Prison in Tehran, which is holding the political prisoners. So this is another level of anxiety that we are experiencing right now.

NINA MOINI: Talking about some of the anxiety, I understand you have friends, family in Iran. What have you been hearing from them? Have you been able to reach out to them and be in touch with them consistently?

PARHAM ALAEI: Not consistently. It's been very troublesome and hard to get through to Iran. Some phone calls go through, but as you know, the internet was cut off by the regime four or five days ago. And there are some spots that you can actually get on the internet using VPNs and such.

So we do get some messages from Iran, mostly from the provinces, actually, in the case of myself. And Tehran is actually harder. But again, it's hard to get the news out, but we are, basically, grasping onto anything we can get, any new thing we can get from the family and friends.

NINA MOINI: For those who aren't familiar with your organization, the Minnesota Committee in Support of a Democratic Iran opposes the rule of the current regime. Do you see this war as an opportunity to bring about regime change in Iran, which is currently a theocracy? And what do you feel, or from the perspective of your organization, would be the right approach?

PARHAM ALAEI: Well, yes we do. We have been advocating for a free and democratic Iran since our founding in 2009. We obviously do not support external war. But what we are hoping for is this would lead to a better democratic Iran, an Iran that the people of Iran can actually go out and vote what they want for in a democratic government in the future. So that's an ultimate hope for this. And how to get there, it has to be done by the people within the country, not from outside.

NINA MOINI: What do you want people to understand, perhaps Minnesotans who may not have a lot of Iranian friends, about just what life is like for Iranian people in Iran and why your organization wants to see change occur?

PARHAM ALAEI: Absolutely. I mean, the Iranian government has been governing Iran, basically, by repression, imprisonment, and torture, and killing of people for 40-plus years. It is a repressive regime. The women's rights are, of course, nonexistent. The minority rights are nonexistent. So all of these causes-- it's a theocratic regime, as you mentioned.

So again, that's what people are facing. People do not want war in Iran. Neither do we. But people are tired of the regime. And again, they are hoping that this would be a catalyst for change in the near future.

NINA MOINI: It's been-- this regime has been in place since 1979. I wondered how the community, the Iranian community in Minnesota, is coming together in the past few weeks because there are some differing opinions among different people as to what could happen or what should happen. What have you been noticing or has your organization been doing?

PARHAM ALAEI: Well, absolutely, there are differences of opinion, like any community. And then we've seen people coming together. There is a lot of chat going on. I guess, right now, we haven't had any in-person meetings, but it's mostly through the social media and the texts and phone calls. And everybody is coming together. Everybody is hoping for a better future for Iran.

But what to do right now? The only thing we can do at this point is to raise attention to the Iran and make sure that people that the Iranian regime is not equal to the Iranian people. And the war is not between the peoples of countries, between two governments, as a result of the policies of the Iranian regime for the past 40-plus years.

NINA MOINI: I know your organization and some others have been having smaller protests for several years now. Are you hearing of any sort of gathering among people or just a perspective as to what the size of the Iranian community in Minnesota is?

PARHAM ALAEI: Absolutely. We've had protests since 2009. But probably the peak of the protest was right after the Mahsa Amini murder. And back then, we had hundreds of people. And again, the numbers dwindle quite a bit over the years because of the-- again, our purpose is to support the Iranian people inside Iran. And if they rise up, we will rise up to their support.

We have had protests. We haven't had any recently. The last one was two weeks ago, actually, in support of the truckers strike. So we are keeping an eye on that. As far as this current situation goes, we don't have anything planned. But we might actually be looking into that-- again, raising the attention to the plight of the Iranian people and political prisoners.

NINA MOINI: And you were speaking there of the Women Life Freedom movement that began around 2022 or so. But there have been other protests that have popped up, like you mentioned, in recent years and since 2009. So as we move forward, Parham, the US Constitution says that Congress has the sole power to declare war. If you could speak with Minnesota's congressional delegation of both parties, what would you ask them to keep in mind as they are weighing their options?

PARHAM ALAEI: Yes, I'm aware of that constitutional obligation. But I mean, frankly, I think previous presidents attacked other countries, as I recall myself. I've been here for a long time, so I about the politics. And this has been done in the past without the Congressional approval. But again, if this becomes more of an ongoing conflict, probably Congress should be involved in this regard, as well.

NINA MOINI: Parham, thank you very much for your time this afternoon, I appreciate it.

PARHAM ALAEI: Absolutely. Thank you, Nina,

NINA MOINI: That was Parham Alaei, a cofounder of the Minnesota Committee in Support of a Democratic Iran.