

Inside '5,000-day war' on Iran

By Nargol Aran

Tehran-based columnist

OPINION

I come back to the clip of Hamideh in a long fuchsia coat passing the Qur'an over her daughter's head for the first day of school. It is September 2023. Her seven-year-old kisses the Book and walks beneath it.

Almost two years later, in the early hours of June 13, 2025, Hamideh's building was hit as Israel hunted down Iran's military-scientific establishment. Sixty lives were taken in that one blast, including Hamideh's two daughters and husband.

We sit in a small room at her sister's house. The power is out, but the afternoon sun slants in, casting a lattice of light and shadow. Hamideh wears a black dress and a long black shawl. The warmth in her brown eyes that I'd seen in all her photos has gone cold. "I had the most beautiful family," she says, squeezing her eyes shut. Tears come in quick jets. Our weeping leaves a damp hush that settles us. She sits upright, touches my hand, and begins to speak again.

Hamideh and Alireza met as undergrads in engineering school in Isfahan. They married four years later in 2010.

"I loved you from the very first day," he confessed. He was a teacher's son, she a shopkeeper's daughter. Classmates went abroad, but Alireza, who was born in the aftermath of the Imposed War — the war between Iraq and Iran from 1980 to 1988 — believed in staying to build the nation that had endured eight years of onslaught. Defense work carried prestige and honor. He began as a contractor with Parchin, the company known for its role in Iran's missile program, and later took on a full-time position.

On Thursday, June 12, 2025, Hamideh cooked Alireza's favorite meal: pilaf with braised shank. Ayma and Hida took turns doing Hamideh's hair after lunch as they filled their backpacks. Ayma was more boisterous, while Hida walked with an air of mystery. They had a routine of placing mats on the carpet in the living room and sleeping as "mother and girls". But that night, they asked to sleep "father and girls". She kissed them goodnight and went into the bedroom at 1 a.m. At 3:30, she was awakened "with a shrieking red light." She knew it was Israel.

"And then I was falling," she says, gasping for air. She landed on the



A weeping woman carries her bleeding baby following the surprise Israeli strikes on residential neighborhoods in Keshavarz Boulevard, downtown Tehran, Iran, on June 15, 2025.

AMIR KHOLOUSI/WANA

mattress with the frame of the bed protecting most of her body except her neck — there, she felt intense stabbing. "My mind was racing between the fear of paralysis and what had happened to Alireza and the kids."

She heard sirens. A hand came to her through the crack in the wall. "My name is Omid," a man told her. The name means hope. "I will help you get out." She begged him not to leave.

The rescuer stayed and passed her a bottle of water. "It soothed but also awakened me. I was ready to jump out of my life," she says.

She was in a black haze — and then she was in an ambulance. She was fully awake in the hospital. But no one knew who else had survived. "I prayed to see them alive, and if that wasn't meant for us, to have God grant me patience."

By nightfall, she was told Alireza's body was found next to the girls. She was in the hospital with a treatable spinal injury, but they were gone, their flesh in pieces. Hamideh doesn't think she can rewrite the aftermath; it feels like it has been written. For months, they had arranged to be away that week but abruptly postponed their plans at the last minute. She was supposed to be the one who slept with the girls in the living room. Then, suddenly, a great terror uprooted their lives, and she was on her own.

What does she think this force is? I ask.

Israel is targeting our societies by hitting our backbone, she explains.

That night, commanders, scientists, and engineers were killed alongside their families and neighbors. They were targeted in their homes, not on a battlefield. The world is enabling Israel to murder our elders in their work and our children in their sleep, or as they fetch food and water. "What I saw people suffer in Gaza, which I couldn't bear to look at (may I be forgiven), is now mine," Hamideh says softly. Does she have any clue how one survives? "I know I was granted the minimum I prayed for. I was given patience," she answers.

In the garden of martyrs

I am at Rasoul Mosque, high on a hill. It is the "chehelom" — the 40th day of mourning — for Sardar Gholam Ali Rashid, one of our armed forces' most senior commanders, and his son, a young seminary student. Both were murdered by Israel in air strikes on June 13. In the mosque courtyard, photos of Ayma, Hida, and the other children surround the pool, scented with sweet tube-rose.

I climb to the women's gallery and lean on the rail, watching the men gather directly under the dome. Sardar Rashid stares back at me from a banner that hangs beneath a blue-tile frieze, the color of his eyes, inscribed with Aya 5 of Sura al-Jumu'ah: "The example of those who were entrusted with observing the Torah but failed to do so, is that of a donkey carrying books."

A nuclear-armed US outpost on the Eastern Mediterranean is usurping Judaism to annihilate

our societies. The crimes it commits, like the "state" itself, know no boundaries. The order that preached "Human Rights" to us and that also enables Israel meant its right to commit genocide and crucify those willing to defy it. I look downstairs. A veteran of the Imposed War, the war when Sardar Rashid first entered battle, removes his prosthetic leg and settles on the blue-and-white flatweave mat with diamond lattice. Children play tag behind me. A woman hands down laminated Qur'an pages rimmed with orange flowers. By each of us reading one, we contribute to the whole. Sadeq Ahangaran steps to the podium. He is a war elegist, carrying the snowy mantle of old age. He once went to our soldiers on the front, which is now the city, where victims have no age limit. "Our beloved is gone. Our tulip is in the Garden of Martyrs," he recites in an embered voice, the flickers of a fire settling.

A soft response begins to gather around him. We answer in a half-voice — a chorus shadowing him while hitting our chests in rhythm. The silence between the thuds is the terror we now own. Our protectors have been taken. Tears burn my face and spot the green of my shawl. Ahangaran leaves an intentional pause, and the cadenced blows of "sineh-zani" — our collective expressions of grief — rise as the percussion of vibrating bodies breaks the quiet. The Martyr's promise — to save — echoes up to the dome.

A river of names

It is August. We are still in a

"cease-fire."

"We cease; Israel fires," the martyred Refaat Alareer said.

I'm at the office of Agahiyeh Nō magazine to meet 43-year-old journalist Sergei Barseghian. For the past few years, I've read him tear apart the "absolutely bonkers" opposition being tailored for Iran by the US and Israel, "to bring democracy if they succeed in destroying us".

He woke to the sound of explosions on June 13. "I wanted it to be the construction next door, but I knew what it was," he says, running his hands over his silver quiff before saying, "Israel."

What did he feel most of all? "It had already been clear in Gaza and Lebanon, but still, rage that they could commit such atrocities so openly," he said. A political editor for Khabaronline, he went straight to his phone and laptop with his team. Neighbors and extended family were wiped out as entire apartment blocks like Hamideh's were brought down: "a river of names..."

The target set — armed forces, defense industry, and later, broadcasting — was "to force capitulation by making it impossible to respond," Barseghian says.

On the third and 12th days, Israel slaughtered nearly 100 people, first at a busy intersection and then at a prison.

But Barseghian had no intention of leaving the city. "I wasn't afraid of death."

He says Israel functions as a concentrated Western power, backed by diplomatic cover and missile defenses; for the attack on Iran alone, it received an IAEA endorsement and a quarter of America's THAAD interceptors. The German foreign minister who defended attacks on hospitals in Gaza is presiding over the UNGA. "They gave up everything they had made for Israel," Barseghian says.

However, he adds, unlike the past two Iranian dynasties that faced colonial Europe, the Islamic Republic of Iran has proven capable of defending its borders, despite claims that it would prove little more than a paper tiger that could be taken out with one swift blow. Barseghian recalls watching Iranian air defenses from the rooftop as a child when Iraq, also backed by the United States, bombed Tehran. But he adds that as destruction intensifies, so does the distortion of language.

In Gaza, they said, "Hamas is under hospitals." That, Barseghian argues, was how the bombings were normalized. In Iran, the euphemism

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People help casualties on the floor following the Israeli strikes on Tehran, Iran, on June 15, 2025.

AMIR KHOLOUSI/WANA



Relatives mourn over the flag-draped coffin of Mahan Setareh, a member of the paramilitary Basij force who was killed in Israeli attacks, during his funeral ceremony in Tehran, Iran, on June 26, 2025.

VAHID SALEMI/AP