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Open Hearing

U.S. House of Representatives

Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

"Axis of Abuse: U.S. Human Rights Policy

toward Iran and Syria, Part II"

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September 22, 2011

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The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to be among the foremost countries in the world that systematically abuse human rights. The mechanisms of suppression in Iran have become so sophisticated that many of them are invisible. For instance, Iran is the largest prison for journalists in the world, yet a much larger number of journalists and political and human rights activists are not allowed to leave the country or lead an ordinary life even after being released on bail. They are also periodically subject to harassment by security and intelligence authorities. By enforcing its techniques of intimidation, the Islamic Republic has made society livable only for those who are loyal to the government.

The Western campaign against human rights abuses in Iran has proved to be extremely helpful. When Western governments or human rights organizations have responded in a timely and proper manner toward cases of abuse in Iran, the regime has felt the heat and become visibly more cautious. For example, **Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani**, initially sentenced to death by stoning, was saved only by pressures applied on the Islamic Republic by Western states and human rights organizations. In most of the cases in which prisoners' situations were publicized or Revolutionary Court sentences against political and religious victims were highlighted in the West, the Islamic Republic either backed down or became more aware of the consequences of its decisions and actions regarding these specific cases. For instance, the Bahai religious leaders who have been in prison for the last three years would likely have been executed if not for the public, Western campaign against the regime. They initially were accused of spying for Israel and convicted to twenty years in prison, but the appeals court reduced their sentence to ten years.

Both the legislative and executive branches of the U.S. government have properly reacted to human rights abuses in Iran with effective announcements and practical measures aimed at preventing the regime from oppressing its own people. In particular, America's joint efforts with the European Union in singling out and sanctioning officials who have been directly involved in human rights abuses were extremely helpful. These efforts sent a clear message to the Iranian government that the West cannot tolerate the brutality of a state against its citizens. They also sent a powerful message to the Iranian people that they are not alone, and that the free nations support their quest for democracy and liberal society.

Reacting to specific cases of human rights abuse such as Sakineh Ashtiani's is effective and necessary, but it is also important to target the Islamic Republic's legal system, which legitimizes the abuse of human rights. Stoning women for adultery, executing people for drug-related offenses, executing underage people, depriving women from equal rights with men, and other abuses are embedded in the country's laws. We have to pressure Iran to reform its legal system in order to bring it into line with universal human rights.

Iran has the highest rate of execution in the world. Most execution cases are not political but rather for drug-related offenses. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has executed approximately 12,000 people for such offenses. The effectiveness of the regime's drug detection program is in part due to the support it receives from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which provides the country with drug detection technology. Since this program was launched in 2007, the regime has carried out more than 2,000 executions for drug offenses. Human rights activists in Iran are extremely concerned about the government's use of UN funds for torture and execution. Moreover, the authorities in charge of fighting drug crime in Iran are the same "police" forces placed in charge of abusing civil and human rights and oppressing women and youths. The United States and the EU should work together within the framework of the UN to make sure that the Iranian regime and its police do not use this fund to abuse human rights or execute more people.

It is important to mention that the Iranian government organizations primarily involved in human rights abuses are the same organizations that run the military and the nuclear program. In other words, those who oppress the Iranian people are also the ones who have generated international concern regarding the real intentions behind Iran's nuclear program and the regime's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East. It is very important to convey this to the Iranian people: the West is well aware that those who threaten the freedom and civil rights of the Iranian people also threaten security, stability, and peace in the Middle East.

If the United States wants to continue to act effectively against human rights abuses in Iran, it must work more closely with the European Union to expand cooperation in this field. It is vital for the Iranian regime to hear one unified, consistent, and persistent voice when it comes to human rights and political and religious freedoms. Toward that end, the United States and the EU should pressure the Islamic Republic to allow Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, to enter the country and report on human rights abuses by examining the situation directly. The United States and EU should also continue to expand the sanctions list to encompass other important individuals involved in human rights violations in Iran.

Iran's power is centralized around Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. He is the final decisionmaker on both domestic and foreign policy. Ayatollah Khamenei runs the country through his office, which consists mostly of military and intelligence senior commanders and officers. The Islamic Republic's policy to suppress political critics and restrict freedom of religion is designed in this office under the direct supervision and guidance of the Supreme Leader. When it comes to such oppression, all other institutions are under Ayatollah Khamenei's command: the judiciary, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Basij militia, the police, the intelligence services, and the executive and legislative branches

of the government. Therefore, his office must be watched constantly and closely in order to find those who advise and influence him to crack down on the Iranian people and eliminate or intimidate critics of the regime's policies. As important as targeting individuals involved in the abuse of human rights is to enforce current sanctions and publicize cases in which such individuals applied for visas but were rejected or had their assets frozen.

In particular, the following regime figures should be added to the list of sanctioned individuals:

1. **Hossein Shariatmadari**, Khamenei's representative at *Kayban* newspaper and a key advisor to the Supreme Leader in oppressing critics, intellectuals, students, and women's rights activists
2. **Mojtaba Khamenei**, the Supreme Leader's second son, who is directly involved in leading the Basij militia and the Intelligence Ministry in oppressive activities
3. **Asghar Mir Hejazi**, security deputy in the Supreme Leader's office and former deputy of the Intelligence Ministry, where he was in charge of assassinating dozens of opposition activists outside Iran
4. **Vahid Haghani**, executive deputy of the Supreme Leader, a member of the IRGC, and a key element in coordinating security and military forces
5. **Muhammad Shirazi**, head of the military department of the Supreme Leader's office and a key advisor to Khamenei on IRGC and military issues
6. **Ahmad Marvi**, head of the clergy department in the Supreme Leader's office who is directly involved in designing and implementing Khamenei's policies with regard to religious figures, and who has played a key role in the arrest, torture, and intimidation of the regime's clerical critics
7. **Hossein Mohammadi**, propaganda advisor to Khamenei and a key figure in designing media censorship efforts and providing the regime's different bureaus with policy orientation on this issue.

In addition, since the right of freedom of expression includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of borders, the United States and the EU should also sanction all individuals and entities involved in restricting access to internet and satellite services in Iran. In this regard, three categories should be recognized:

1. All those involved in restricting access to the internet, such as **Minister of Information and Communications Reza Taqipour Anvari** and his deputies. **The Center for Fighting against Organized Crime** -- a branch of the IRGC in charge of controlling websites, blocking and hacking political sites, hacking e-mail accounts of political activists, and arresting bloggers and cyber activists -- should also be targeted, as should members of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revo-

lution who are mainly in charge of censorship in various fields, including cyberspace.

2. Despite the fact that the Islamic Republic is legally committed not to interfere with other countries' satellite broadcasting in Iran, the regime regularly jams transmission of television and radio satellite programming and violates rules set up by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). This is a clear violation of the Iranian people's right to receive and impart information and ideas through the media. Unfortunately, the ITU has little authority to enforce its rulings. Yet because Iran itself is using the same satellites -- including Eutelsat, Hotbird, and Nilesat -- to broadcast in other countries in different languages, Congress can pass a bill prohibiting Iran from using any service that interrupts other countries' usage in a manner that violates international law. U.S. and European satellite companies in particular should not provide services to Iran if the regime continues to jam satellite transmission of U.S. and European-based television and radio. Also, individuals who are involved in planning and executing the jamming of satellite transmissions should be sanctioned. Khamenei's media advisor, members of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, officials of the Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology, as well as **head of state television and former IRGC commander Ezzatollah Zarghami** are all involved in such violations of human rights.
  
3. Ayatollah Khamenei has warned of the "danger" of Western culture for a long time. For example, he had often asked officials to limit the teaching of humanities in the universities. Consequently, the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education has fired many humanities professors under accusations of being "secular." It has also halted the admission of students in such majors in order to change the textbooks and hire "committed Islamist" professors. Therefore, the Islamic Republic systematically deprives Iranian youths of learning humanities in universities or engaging in public debates about such subjects. It also enforces severe censorship on books and journals in these fields. Therefore, all individuals and organizations involved in violating human rights by placing any kind of censorship or restriction on the people's access to humanities in any form should be sanctioned. These include **Kamran Daneshjoo**, minister of culture and higher education; **Mohammad Hosseini**, minister of culture and Islamic guidance, which is the main body in charge of censorship; **Gholam Ali Haddad Adel**, the Supreme Leader's advisor on cultural affairs who played a key role in restricting humanities in the universities; **Rahim Azghadi**, another advisor to the Supreme Leader; **Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi**, theoretician on violence and restricting humanities; and Khamenei's representatives in all Iranian universities, including **Alireza Panahian**

a leading ideologue of Islamist fundamentalism who is in charge of policy planning for restricting humanities in universities.

Although helping the Iranian people obtain full and easy access to the internet is crucial, we should bear in mind that the internet can be a double-edged sword. It gives individuals access to information, but at the same time it helps authoritarian governments monitor people more effectively, identify opposition figures, and break their circles. The Iranian government has been able to arrest or harass hundreds of people simply by hacking their emails or social media accounts. Therefore, besides providing technical help to Iranians to speed up their internet and bypass the filtering, the United States should help them with internet security. Iranians need to be able to use email and social media without fear that the government is spying on them.

Finally, the Iranian regime has also facilitated the brutal suppression of the opposition in Syria in several ways. The Islamic Republic's main contribution involves advising the Syrian regime on how to trace political activists through the internet and phones, and how to deal with such activists in general. What has happened in Syria in recent months -- from setting internet and phone traps for activists to holding Stalinist show trials for opposition figures -- is very similar to what has happened in Iran since the rigged election of June 2009.

The EU has already sanctioned IRGC commander-in-chief Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari, Qods Force commander **Qasem Soleimani**, and IRGC intelligence chief **Hossein Taeb** for their role in violating the Syrian people's human rights and suppressing the opposition. And the United States should work with the EU to identify more military officials who should be added to both the EU and U.S. sanction lists. But it is also necessary to sanction the various political officials and diplomats who design Iran's policy toward Syria and actually order the military to help the Asad regime crack down on the opposition. Each of the following key officials has played a significant role in facilitating Syria's brutal violence against peaceful activists and opposition figures: **Ali Akbar Velayati**, the Supreme Leader's advisor and former minister of foreign affairs; **Mohsen Qomi**, international relations deputy in the Supreme Leader's office, **Muhammad Hassan Akhtari**, the Supreme Leader's advisor in Syrian affairs and former Iranian ambassador to Damascus; and **Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani**, the current Iranian ambassador to Syria.