

Iran and the Human Rights Opening

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Articles & Testimony

Action on Iran's domestic brutality can prevent the Islamic Republic from labeling sanctions as something they are not intended to be: an attack on the Iranian public.

With tensions mounting over Iran's nuclear program, the West has dealt the Tehran regime crippling blows on several fronts, including through sanctions, the targeted killing of scientists, and cyber operations such as the Stuxnet virus. Tehran is no doubt reeling, but regime leaders have spotted a silver lining: The West's single-minded focus on the nuclear dossier has permitted them to widen their violations of human rights.

Indeed, since the protests that followed the 2009 election, Iran's human-rights abuses have worsened substantially - a development that has gone largely unnoticed in the U.S. and Europe. This is a tragedy with profound strategic implications for the West.

The Iranian legal system allows numerous human-rights violations, including discrimination against women and ethno-sectarian minorities, and the imposition of brutal penal sentences, such as stoning. Tehran's ruling theocrats view human rights as a Western invention used to undermine Islamic culture and sovereignty as part of what Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei considers a soft war against Iran. They therefore do not believe themselves duty-bound to uphold their basic human-rights obligations, including those under international agreements to which they are party.

Consider this example: A man, under house arrest for the past two years, learned of the death at different points of his two sisters. The state refused him the right to attend either funeral. This outrageous case did not involve an average Iranian citizen but rather Mehdi Karroubi, a presidential candidate in 2009 and the former speaker of parliament. Mr. Karroubi has remained under arbitrary house arrest since the post-election uprising along with two other dissidents, Mir Hossein Mousavi -- the opposition's leading presidential candidate -- and his wife, Zahra

Rahnavard, who was heavily involved in her husband's campaign.

Political prisoners do not exist in Iran, Mohammad Javad Larijani, secretary to the judiciary's bogus "human-rights committee," recently claimed. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly said similar things. In truth, dozens of political activists remain imprisoned, and hundreds of others are barred from leaving the country because of their advocacy for human rights or equal rights for women and minorities. Tens of thousands of Iranians abroad are also forbidden from returning to their home country on account of their beliefs.

Even as international attention has drifted away from the domestic scene in Iran, the mere mention of human-rights abuses still touches a nerve among regime leaders. Intelligence officials have arrested prominent lawyers who belong to the Association of Human Rights Defenders, claiming their activities are illegal.

Abdul Fattah Sultani, one of the association's founding members, was sentenced to 18 years in prison and disbarred for 20 years last April. His only "crime" was accepting an international human-rights award while Iranian government officials themselves committed or condoned rights violations.

Although Iran's nuclear program and the bloodshed in Syria dominate U.S. attention in the Middle East, human-rights abuses in Iran must remain on the Western radar.

Reports of gross abuses from prisoners and other evidence have led human-rights activists and groups to press strongly for action by democratic countries to counter abuses inside the country. Such action, activists believe, would significantly reduce the frequency of violations, given the Islamic Republic's deep concerns about its image both domestically and abroad. From the regime's perspective, this same logic underlies efforts to forbid journalists and activists from reporting these cases to the media.

Thus any publicity given to such cases could help persuade Iran to alter its behavior for the better. Western reaction to human-rights abuses can include statements, declarations, sanctions and travel restriction on officials involved in human-rights abuse.

It is helpful to recall that past efforts by the international community have yielded results. Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, a woman in her early 40s accused of adultery and condemned to death by stoning, was spared her death sentence after the international community voiced its outrage and disgust over the decision. On a more local scale, prisoners have revealed that international pressure has even influenced their treatment by guards and officials.

Support for human rights in Iran is more than a moral duty for any democratic nation. It should also be a strategic pillar of the West's policy toward the Islamic Republic. The Iranian people's full voice will never be heard as long as the repression continues. By speaking out, the United States and other Western powers can reassure Iranians that they have allies, empowering them to continue fighting for their cause: a free and democratic Iran -- a cause shared by the Iranian people and the West.

Whatever the fate of the nuclear crisis, Western states that joined together to impose sanctions on Iran must keep an open line of communication with the Iranian people. Likewise, these states must refrain from imposing additional sanctions without addressing the suffering of the Iranian people.

On the human-rights question, persistent and steady action offers the best way for the West to demonstrate its concern over Iranian abuses. Such action will also prevent the Islamic Republic from labeling Western sanctions as something they are not intended to be: a Western attack on the Iranian public.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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