

PREPARED TESTIMONY OF  
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**The Human Rights Situation in Iran**

Chairman McGovern, and Chairman Wolf, thank you for allowing me to come before you to discuss the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in Iran. And thank you for holding this meeting to address human rights in Iran. This discussion is much needed - indeed, according to Amnesty International, the human rights situation in Iran is currently as bad as it has been in the past thirty years.

As a representative of the largest grassroots organization representing Americans of Iranian descent in the U.S. - The National Iranian American Council - I want to emphasize that no group of Americans has suffered more from the policies of the Iranian government than our community. Whether they were victims of political or religious persecution, or other forms of human rights abuses, the vast majority of Iranian Americans have made America their home precisely because they have differences with the Iranian government.

Those differences have clearly grown as a result of the contested June 2009 elections, not only due to the electoral fraud, but perhaps more due to the gross human rights violations committed by the government in its aftermath.

My prepared remarks today will focus on steps that the United States and the international community can take to pressure the Iranian government to cease its human rights violations and to support Iran's human rights defenders.

***Background***

In the report "The Islamic Republic at 31: Post-Election Abuses Show Serious Human Rights Crisis," Human Rights Watch documents widespread human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killings; rapes and torture; violations of the rights to freedom of assembly and expression; and thousands of arbitrary arrests and detentions during the nine months since the election on June 12, 2009. Witnesses have spoken of mock executions, torture, rape and random beatings of prisoners.

Hundreds of individuals – including some who did not partake in any protests against the election fraud – were coerced to make false confessions on TV, implicating themselves in so-called anti-revolutionary activities.

The worst abuses against ordinary protestors have taken place at police stations and detention centers. One of these detention centers was shut down in August after evidence of violations was uncovered. Last month, the Iranian parliament investigated the deaths and allegations of torture and named former Tehran Prosecutor-General Saeed Mortazavi as the person responsible. Although the panel dismissed allegations of sexual abuse, it found that widespread violations had taken place in the detention center. However, neither Mortazavi nor anyone else implicated in the abuse has yet been prosecuted.

To this day, we do not have an accurate figure of the number of people who have been killed by the Iranian authorities in this latest wave of repression. The official numbers are likely grossly underestimated.

The reason for the under-reporting is partly due to the threats the families of the victims face. A friend of my own family had their 16 year-old daughter shot on the streets during the first day of the protests. Her family has not reported her death due to pressure from the Iranian authorities. The fear is that if they do go public, the authorities will punish their sole remaining child. He is a college student and though he wasn't involved in the protests, the authorities have made it clear that he is a target if the family reports the death of their daughter.

These threats are not empty. The authorities are currently targeting the children and relatives of opposition figures. For instance, 18 year-old Atefeh Emam, the daughter of Javad Emam, the Chief of Staff of Moussavi's campaign, has been imprisoned and is being pressured to make a "confession" in order to implicate her father. At the same time, according to her mother, Leyla Saadaat Jalalzadeh, the government tortured Atefeh to press her father to implicate other individuals in Moussavi's circle.

The nephew of opposition leader Mir Hossein Moussavi was shot dead in December. The same month, the Iranian authorities arrested the sister of Nobel Laureate and human rights defender Shirin Ebadi. In an interview with Omid Memarian of Inter Press Service, Ebadi said that the Iranian authorities "have taken my sister as a hostage, hoping that I would stop my work."

Abuses against Iran's Baha'i community have also intensified during this period. Seven leaders of the Baha'i community are currently on trial behind closed doors in Tehran facing espionage charges. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States point out that Iranian law prohibits putting people in jail for two months without pressing charges. In this case, as in many of the other cases discussed here, the Iranian authorities are not only violating human rights conventions that Iran is a party to, but also laws that the Iranian authorities themselves have adopted.

Executions of prisoners and protesters have also increased. On January 28, Mohammad-Reza Ali-Zamani and Arash Rahmanipour were executed for the capital crime of *moharebeh*, or "taking up arms against God". Though the Iranian authorities claimed that the two were involved in anti-government protests following the election dispute, Rahmanipour's lawyer points out he was arrested a month before the elections.

His lawyer was prevented from representing him at his show trial in July and was shocked at the news of the executions, as she was still waiting for word from the appeals court. His father heard about his son's execution on television. Nine other activists have been convicted of *moharebeh* and are awaiting execution. Hundreds more await trial, though they are denied access to legal representation.

On February 15, the UN Human Rights Council severely criticized Iran during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of human rights to which all UN members are subject. Iran dismissed the criticism and rejected important recommendations by the United Nations to improve human rights in the country. Iran rejected recommendations such as ending the execution of juvenile offenders; upholding fair trial guarantees, investigating torture allegations including rape, and releasing people detained for peacefully exercising their human rights. While accepting a recommendation to cooperate with the UN's human rights experts, Iran rejected several others to allow the Council's Special Rapporteur on torture to visit the country. According to Amnesty International, Iran accepted the recommendation to respect freedom of religion but rejected a recommendation to end discrimination against the Baha'is.

### *Why Iran is sensitive to pressure on human rights*

In spite of Iran's rejection of these recommendations, it should be noted that the Iranian authorities are sensitive to criticism of their human rights record. This is largely driven by Iran's ambition to be recognized as a regional leader. The very nature of the revolution drives this impulse. Three decades ago, it was Iran – not Washington – which spoke of regime change. The victorious revolutionaries sought to export the revolution to neighboring countries with the aim of recreating the Middle East in their own image.

Tehran's efforts failed abysmally. No other country followed Tehran's lead, and by the early 1990s, it was clear that Iran's own revolution was in trouble. Iran was broke, war-torn, isolated, and starved of international investment. A leader it was not.

Reacting to these realities, Tehran adopted a new approach. Rather than exporting the revolution, Iran sought to become a model Islamic state that others would aspire to emulate. But countries aiming for leadership roles have no choice but to safeguard their records. Just as the Iranian government's violent reactions to election protests further de-legitimized it at home, international focus on Iran's abuses will serve to weaken its regional leadership credentials.

Tehran knows this. This is partly why Tehran spends significant diplomatic capital seeking to water down resolutions condemning its human rights record at international bodies. It is also why it is quick to deflect attention from its own record by criticizing Washington's abuses. For instance, Iran sent a high-ranking and experienced official to the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, Mohammad-Javad Larijani, secretary general of Iran's High Council for Human Rights and a member of the prominent Larijani family. Sending such a highly placed envoy illustrates the importance Tehran assigns to defending its human rights record on the international stage.

Contrast this to the behavior of North Korea or Myanmar, which mostly ignore condemnation of their human rights records.

Human rights have become the rallying cry of the Iranian Green Movement. Today, the loudest voices calling for respect for human rights is coming from Iran's own civil society and its leaders.

Criticism of Iran's human rights record should not be confused with interference in Iran's internal affairs. As a signatory to numerous conventions, Iran has a legal obligation to uphold human rights - and the international community has an obligation to speak up when it fails to do so.

### *Recommendations*

The world must not forget about the human rights situation in Iran. For too long, there has been a singular focus on the nuclear issue, while neglecting the many other challenges posed by the policies of Iran's government. Not only has that been to the detriment of the human rights situation in the country, but it has also made Washington's policy towards Iran narrow, one-dimensional and consequently, unsuccessful.

There is much the world can do to help stop abuses in Iran. And there is much that the United States can do in tandem with the partners in the international community. Examples of measures that can be taken are listed below.

1. **Break the silence:** There should be absolute clarity that, from a moral standpoint, the United States supports the Iranian people's demand for human rights. Silence betrays that clarity. The

United States should speak forcefully and frequently about the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran. There has been a marked up-tick in the Administration's statements about the human rights situation in Iran, particularly during the UN Periodic review. However, human rights statements on Iran should be a permanent and proactive feature of America's language on Iran, not merely temporary and reactive.

2. **Pressure Iran at international forums:** The United States should, in collaboration with the international community, use every opportunity to press Iran on its human rights record at international forums.
3. **Secure a UN Envoy:** For instance, the US should work in tandem with the international community to call for a special session at the UN Human Rights Council with the objective of adopting a special UN envoy for human rights in Iran. This is a measure that prominent human rights defenders such as Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi have repeatedly called for.
4. **Include human rights as part of diplomatic efforts with Iran:** Diplomacy with Iran currently seems futile given the state of Tehran's political paralysis following the election dispute. However, if and when it is resumed, diplomacy should not be limited to the nuclear issue. Rather, the human rights situation in Iran must be on the agenda. Pressure on Iran at international forums is more effective when Washington also applies direct pressure on Iran over its human rights record through diplomacy.
5. **Human rights must be pursued for its own sake:** There are fears in the human rights community that human rights might be used as an instrument to win concessions on the nuclear issue. Consequently, human rights would be turned into a bargaining chip in the nuclear talks and sacrificed in order to secure a nuclear deal. That would be a disastrous approach. Rather, human rights must be pursued for their own purpose, with an eye on the long-term interest and soft power of the United States in Iran.
6. **Keep military tensions at a minimum:** The United States should tread carefully when it comes to issuing military threats. Under the shadow of a foreign military threat, the uphill battle of Iran's human rights defenders becomes next to impossible, as the Iranian government is quite adept at exploiting foreign threats to crackdown on domestic opponents. And needless to say, war would cause the ultimate human suffering.
7. **Protect the people, target the abusers:** The United States should avoid sanctions that place a burden on the Iranian people, rather than the Iranian government. Broad-based sanctions aimed at the entire economy hurt common citizens far more than the powerful elites. Any new sanctions should demonstrate not only international disapproval of Tehran's conduct, but also should explicitly demonstrate the United States' commitment to avoid harming average Iranians. The United States should focus its sanctions on Iran's human rights abuses. Targeted sanctions should be imposed that designate specific individuals within the government and the IRGC responsible for the repression and human rights violations.
8. **Correct US policies that unintentionally punish Iranians:** As part of the extensive Iran sanctions regime built up over the last two decades, US policies remain in place that unintentionally contribute to the suffering of innocent Iranians. For instance, US sanctions prohibit Americans from donating money to legitimate Iranian human rights organizations. While the State Department recently announced it is taking the first step to correct counterproductive policies by waiving restrictions on communication software going into Iran that would significantly help and enable Iranian human rights defenders, policymakers

should build on this critical step by looking further into existing policies and making similar corrections.