



American Dollars and Human Rights in Iran

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For 27 years, people of Iran have been suffering from the tensions in the US-Iran relations, but the embezzlers affiliated with the centers of power have benefited from it. For 27 years, the Iranian authorities have imposed a whole range of economic, political, cultural and social restrictions on the people and have justified their official repressions in the name of fighting against international oppressors. For years, the middlemen who manage the international black market have been helping the Iranian government to obtain the products it needs and sell its own products. There have been cases in which weapons have been purchased from these middlemen at much inflated prices and oil has been sold to them, in an unusual manner in the middle of the ocean, at very low prices. The relation between the Iranian government and the agents of the international black market has been strengthened and economic corruption has increased since the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran by the United States.

In analyzing the root causes of the present miserable condition of the people of Iran and the economic corruption that pervades the country, one cannot ignore the eight-year war with Iraq – a war that not only put to waste a good deal of the country's valuable human resources but created the opportunity for the embezzlers to use the country's pressing needs as an excuse for plundering its national wealth. Although the leadership's mismanagement of the affairs of the country was responsible for the break out and prolongation of the war, there are only few people who don't know by now that throughout that war, the Western governments ignored Saddam Hussein's invasion of the Iranian territory.

The deepening crisis in the US-Iran relations is now making the Iranian people think. Some see the solution in an unconditional US intervention, believing that in the absence of such intervention, the people of Iran would not be able to change the present political conditions. Others, who do not approve of an intervention and point to its harmful effects, are incapable of presenting any alternative solutions, especially since government extremists in both countries have for years have blocked any effort toward direct negotiations. Iran's East-oriented policy, which has been questionable for the people of Iran, has also added to the concerns.

During the past few months, the number of advocates of extreme actions has increased in both governments of Iran and the United States. The public opinion in the US, under heavy pressure from the media, is being rapidly changed in favor of taking harsh measures against Iran's radical policies. The crisis in the US-Iran relations has now reached a critical point. It seems, however, that despite all the media hype, either no specific policy towards Iran has been adopted yet or the people in both countries are being kept in the dark about the existence of such a policy.

The recent announcement by Ms. Rice, the US Secretary of State, about the allocation of \$75 million to advance democracy and human rights in Iran has further tightened the political climate in Iran rather than helping the situation. The opponents and critics of the official policies of the Islamic Republic have found it wiser to be cautious since they have always been accused of cooperating with the United States by the judicial and security forces. The announcement by the US Secretary of State about funding Iranian civil and human rights activists and institutions has provided the Iranian security forces with an excuse to



intensify repression and make life more difficult for human and civil rights activists. The public announcement of such a policy, even before Congressional approval, is already proving harmful by intensifying repression in Iran.

Ms. Rice has said that a portion of these funds will be used to improve the human rights situation in Iran; but she has not clarified how such funds would be delivered to human rights activists in Iran without the supervision of the Iranian security forces. Nor is it clarified whether the funds will be used externally for the creation of Persian language radio and TV stations outside Iran or will be used for strengthening human rights bases inside the country. In any case, it seems that Ms. Rice has not benefited from useful advice and is not well briefed about the situation inside Iran. As a result, I find it my responsibility to share with her what I know.

During Mr. Mohammad Khatami's presidency, the hardliners spread the rumor that a suitcase-full of US dollars have been brought into the country and distributed among the reformists. They could never prove this vague accusation, but after several years of rumor-mongering, they finally came up with a scenario and abducted an old journalist. They tortured him until they obtained enough confessions to prove their fabricated case. They forced him to confess to having received a million dollars from the US government and distributed them among pro-reform journalists. Ms. Rice, that old, tortured, journalist is my husband, who was transferred from prison to hospital a while ago and is now under house arrest.

On the basis of confessions obtained from him under torture, a large number of activists in the areas of journalism, politics, art, women's rights and human rights we summoned, interrogated, insulted and threatened. At the time, I was out of the country for medical treatment and could not return. I learned that on the basis of those confessions, I am in serious danger. Ms. Rice, the person who was accused of having received millions of dollars from the US government had no relations with foreign governments whatsoever, and did not have a penny of his own. Nevertheless, they succeeded to fabricate such a scenario and intimidate the people.

The conditions in Iran are such that any financial support by any group of Iranians abroad to the families of political prisoners in Iran can cause trouble for those families. The Iranian travelers are too afraid to take such monies to those poor families. Currency exchange outfits, too, either refuse such a transaction or charge such high fees that make such transactions impossible. It is therefore clear that the recent US policy has been adopted without attention to the internal situation in Iran.

Moreover, the human rights issue does not have a deep root in Iran. It is a new and very fragile issue, which was first raised by President Jimmy Carter in 1978. He forced the Shah to open up the political climate in Iran in accordance with the international conventions and documents on human rights, to which Iran was a signatory. Immediately after such an opening, Iran became a scene of angry protests.

Although the 1979 Revolution in Iran succeeded to overthrow the Shah with the effective help of international conventions on human rights, the new revolutionary government immediately closed the books on the issue of human rights and suppressed the opposition. The Iran-Iraq war also provided the government with a golden opportunity to this end. A government which was formed on a wave of human rights protests against the Shah, now used the war and the "cultural assault by the West" as an excuse to wipe the issue of human rights off the pages of the press and other media and treat the advocates of



human rights as blasphemous people who bent on opposing Islam and promoting Western cultural imprudence.

After many years of silence on the subject, the issue of human rights found its way into the pages of the reformist press, albeit in a limited way, following the election of President Khatami in 1997. These limited discussions led to the creation of some human rights organizations, some linked with the government and some independent. The critical discussions of EU with Iran and the EU's support for some of the human rights organizations in Iran strengthened these new developments, the continuation of which is very useful for the Iranians. At present, a number of human rights organizations are active in Iran and a large number of law students are being attracted to them. All of these human rights activists, however, are being cautious not to arouse the wrath of the security forces.

In such an atmosphere, the announcement of a \$75 million fund to help human rights organizations in Iran will destroy these newly developed organizations like a storm. It will transform the issue of continuation and expansion of human rights activities into one of safeguarding the security of these activists. Allocation of US dollars to the cause of human rights in a country where, for years, the opponents and critics have been suppressed under the trumped up charges of cooperation with and receiving financial support from the government of the United States, cannot be considered a wise decision. Human rights are one of the most valuable achievements of the 20th Century humanity. The Iranian people's lack of success in securing such rights for themselves has in no way been a result of the lack of US dollars.

Every time attempts have been made to strengthen the foundations of human rights in Iran with the help of foreign monies, the effort has backfired. Even if we assume that the Iranian government would ignore such dollars, such an effort will damage the credibility of those human rights organizations in the sensitive eyes of the Iranians, and will turn them into businesses that are ready to do anything in competition with each other in order to get the lion's share of these foreign funds. Foreign money will bring corruption to an already weak civil society in Iran. It will gut the Iranian human rights organizations of the purpose they were made for. Moreover, it will make them ever more vulnerable in the hands of security forces, which can eliminate them at any time by charging them with receiving funds from the United States.

Now, Ms. Rice and other US authorities may ask from people like me: if not through the announced policy, how else can one help strengthen human rights organization in a country like Iran?

There are no easy answers to this question. But it can be suggested that if the leadership of United States has collectively placed supporting human rights activities in Iran on its agenda, and if it insists that the continuation of such activities depends on financial support, then these funds can be channeled through the United Nations. Maybe the UN offices in charge of human rights can disburse these funds to human rights organizations within Iran in a manner that would avoid corruption among these organizations while at the same time minimizing their security risks.

For many years the government of Iran, in spite of all its peculiarities in the area of human rights, has received significant financial support, with positive results, from sources related to the United Nations. The Tehran sewage project, the AIDS prevention project, the population control project, and other health and development projects have all been funded by outside sources through the United Nations. Although



certain UN members have provided these funds, the UN has been fully in charge independently of any other government.

Understanding Iran's internal situation is not easy. Visa restrictions imposed on the Iranians by the United States, and fear of retaliation for participating in the activities of US government institutions, has prevented the Iranian activists inside the country from informing the US government about their living conditions. No doubt, money is needed for advancing any activity or cause. But if US money is used for the purpose of advancing the cause of human rights in Iran, the climate will be poisoned for the continued operation of human rights activists and they will lose their credibility. At this time, maintaining the credibility of these fledgling civil society organizations is more important to Iranians than is any amount of funding.

Not only the present government but also the judgment of the Iranian public opinion will prevent the activity of those human rights organizations that receive financial support from abroad. They would become suspect in the eyes of Iranians. The increasing number of destitute, the poor and victims of violence and other social ills in Iran will storm the offices of organizations that receive foreign funds to demand their share of these monies. It is even possible that conspiratorial elements within the government itself would instigate a group of such people to shut down and destroy foreign-funded human rights organizations. Given the Iranian Government's past record of fabricating such scenarios, such an outcome appears quite possible.

In sum, it can be said that any political approach aimed at ameliorating the present conditions, if it does not correspond to the reality of the internal situation of Iran, is bound to backfire and destroy the limited advancements that have already been achieved in the area of human rights in Iran.

This article was originally written in Farsi and translated by the Council's staff, upon the request of Mehrangiz Kar, for publication in the *AIC Update*. The author is a prominent Iranian lawyer and human rights activist. Kar is currently a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University.