

The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran

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Respect for human rights in any country must spring forth through the will of the people and as part of a genuine democratic process. Such respect can never be imposed by foreign military might and coercion. The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran

By SHIRIN EBADI and HADI GHAEMI

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During her tour of Europe, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has given assurances that a military attack by the United States on Iran "is simply not on the agenda at this point." But notwithstanding Ms. Rice's disavowal, recent statements by the Bush administration, starting with President Bush's State of the Union address and Vice President Dick Cheney's comments about a possible Israeli military attack on Iran, are reminiscent of the rhetoric in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. And Ms. Rice herself made clear that "the Iranian regime's human rights behavior and its behavior toward its own population is something to be loathed."

American policy toward the Middle East, and Iran in particular, is often couched in the language of promoting human rights. No one would deny the importance of that goal. But for human rights defenders in Iran, the possibility of a foreign military attack on their country represents an utter disaster for their cause.

The situation for human rights in Iran is far from ideal. Security forces harass, imprison and even torture human rights defenders and civil society activists. The authorities attack journalists and writers for expressing their opinions and regularly shut down newspapers. Political prisoners languish in jails.

Superfluous judicial summonses are routinely used to intimidate critics, and arbitrary detentions are common.

But Iranian society has refused to be coerced into silence. The human rights discourse is alive and well at the grassroots level; civil society activists consider it to be the most potent framework for achieving sustainable democratic reforms and political pluralism.

Indeed, American readers might be surprised to know how vigorous Iran's human rights organizations are. Last fall, when security forces unlawfully detained more than 20 young journalists and bloggers because of what they had written, independent Iranian organizations like the Center for Defense of Human Rights, the Association of Journalists for Freedom of Press, and the Students Association for Human Rights campaigned for their release.

This outcry, in tandem with support from the international community and human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, led to the release of detainees. In fact, so great was the criticism of the abuses committed during these detentions that some of Iran's most senior government officials came out in favor of releasing the detainees.

Independent organizations are essential for fostering the culture of human rights in Iran. But

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the threat of foreign military intervention will provide a powerful excuse for authoritarian elements to uproot these groups and put an end to their growth.

Human rights violators will use this opportunity to silence their critics by labeling them as the enemy's fifth column. In 1980, after Saddam Hussein invaded Iran and inflamed nationalist passions, Iranian authorities used such arguments to suppress dissidents.

American hypocrisy doesn't help, either. Given the longstanding willingness of the American government to overlook abuses of human rights, particularly women's rights, by close allies in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia, it is hard not to see the Bush administration's focus on human rights violations in Iran as a cloak for its larger strategic interests.

Respect for human rights in any country must spring forth through the will of the people and as part of a genuine democratic process. Such respect can never be imposed by foreign military might and coercion - an approach that abounds in contradictions. Not only would a foreign invasion of Iran vitiate popular support for human rights activism, but by destroying civilian lives, institutions and infrastructure, war would also usher in chaos and instability. Respect for human rights is likely to be among the first casualties.

Instead, the most effective way to promote human rights in Iran is to provide moral support and international recognition to independent human rights defenders and to insist that Iran adhere to the international human rights laws and conventions that it has signed. Getting the Iranian government to abide by these international standards is the human rights movement's highest goal; foreign military intervention in Iran is the surest way to harm us and keep that goal out of reach.

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