

THE CHALLENGE OF IRAN
NOTES FOR ADDRESS TO ROTARY CLUB IN OTTAWA CENTRE
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As co-chair of the NGO Canadian Friends of a Democratic Iran, permit me to stress my high regard for many Iranians living within and outside Iran. Many of them believe in peace, dignity, the rule of law, and freedom of speech and religion as much as Canadians do.

An error outsiders often make is to believe that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speak for all Iranians. They don't for many reasons, but we outsiders should be careful not to provide pretexts for either of them to claim or gain greater public support in Iran. The two, moreover, are now fighting each other. The recent parliamentary elections, for example, were "won" conclusively by Khamaini's candidates against Ahmadinejad's. The Supreme Leader has vowed to replace the office of president with a prime minister after 2013, when Ahmadinejad's term expires.

Consider too the June 2009 election, which supposedly re-elected Ahmadinejad as president with Khamenei's support. Hundreds of thousands of citizens participated in peaceful demonstrations across Iran against wholesale election fraud afterwards. One of the victims of the regime's bloody crackdown was Neda Agha-Soltan, 26, who remains a world icon. The peaceful protests in Iran were among the largest of what became, once similar ones began in Arabic-speaking neighbours, the Arab Spring.



Even the 2009 regime-appointed election monitors admitted that the number of ballots cast in 50 Iranian cities exceeded the number of eligible voters, although they insisted -- lamely -- that this affected only three million votes. Chatham House and Institute of Iranian Studies at St. Andrew's University in Scotland challenged the official results, based on a comparison of 2009 votes with those from the 2005 Iranian one. Overall, there seems to be no doubt that Ahmadinejad's declared victory by eleven million votes was stolen on a large scale.

Nuclear Program

The nuclear issue is the one rightly now dominating the world's attention and is the matter to which I now turn. Tom Friedman wrote one of the best pieces I've seen on this about a week ago in the New York Times (Mar 6th) under the heading. "Israel's Best Friend". Among his points:

1- "Whether Israel has the need and the right to pre-emptively attack Iran as it develops a nuclear potential is one of the most hotly contested issues...today. It is also an issue fraught with danger for Israel and American Jews, neither of whom want to be accused of dragging America into a war, especially one that could weaken an already frail world economy."

2- "... President Obama...offered the greatest support for Israel that any president could at this time." Friedman goes on to paraphrase, but let me instead use the president's own words:

Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon isn't just in the interest of Israel, it is profoundly in the security interests of the United States... If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, this would run completely contrary to my policies of nonproliferation. The risks of an Iranian nuclear weapon falling into the hands of terrorist organizations are profound. ... It would also provide Iran the additional capability to sponsor and protect its proxies in carrying out terrorist attacks, because they are less fearful of retaliation. ... If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, I won't name the countries, but there are probably four or five countries in the Middle East who say, 'We are going to start a program, and we will have nuclear weapons.' ... You essentially then duplicate the challenges of India and Pakistan fivefold or tenfold.

3- Friedman concludes his column somberly: "I'd invite all those cheering (a preemptive strike Against Tehran) to think about all the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the Iraq war or Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. That's not a reason for paralysis. It's a reason to heed Obama's call to give diplomacy and biting sanctions a chance to work, while keeping the threat of force on the table. If it comes to war, let it be because the ayatollahs were ready to sacrifice their whole economy to get a nuke and, therefore, America — the only country that can truly take down Iran's nuclear program--had to act to protect the global system, not just Israel. I respect that this is a deadly serious issue for Israel — which has the right to act on its own — but President Obama has built a solid strategic and political case for letting America take the lead."

I hope all this seems reasonable to you. It does to me.

Camps Ashraf and Liberty

Let me close with some brief thoughts on a complex related issue: the approximately 3400 Iranian refugees in Camps Ashraf, of whom about 800 have recently been moved to Camp Liberty, the former U.S. base near Baghdad airport.

Ashraf was created in the desert about an hour's drive from Baghdad by Iranians, who in 1980 fled from the wave of terror unleashed in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini. They were supporters of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), which was founded in the 1960s by university students, who had actively opposed the regimes of both the shah and the clerics, unfortunately using some violence. Tens of thousands of them were executed by the Khomeini regime when he seized power in 1979.

In 1986, the French government expelled the PMOI members, who had managed to escape Iran and to seek asylum in France, in order to obtain the release of some French soldiers captured by Tehran proxies in Lebanon. Unfortunately only Saddam Hussein's regime would accept them, so they reluctantly relocated to Iraq. The PMOI kept Saddam at arm's length and was neutral during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Following the coalition forces' attack on Saddam, all Ashraf residents voluntarily disarmed and were declared "protected persons" under the Fourth Geneva Convention. They were subsequently guarded by U.S. soldiers. This ended, however, when the U.S. in 2009 handed off their protection under the Convention to the heavily Tehran-influenced government of Nouri al-Maliki. Ignoring successor obligations under international law, his forces have since attacked the camp twice, killing 47 and wounding more than 1,000 unarmed men and women.

Ashraf Canadians

In late December, 2011, I met in Ottawa with nine Canadian citizens of Iranian origin who are former residents of Ashraf. Despite the escalating threat to their own lives as al-Maliki threatened to destroy the camp before the end of 2011, they were all reluctant to leave other refugees behind. They stressed that the others have no other country that will currently accept them and would doubtless all be killed if returned to Tehran.

The nine were encouraged when Canada's all-party House of Commons subcommittee on international human rights unanimously passed, at the end of 2011, a motion calling for Iraq to allow international observers into Ashraf, to extend the deadline, and to ask the government of Canada to push for a UN Security Council resolution to locate a protective force at Ashraf.



Elham Zanjani

Elham Zanjani left her home and university studies in Toronto to live in Ashraf in 1999 at the age of 20. She was wounded in an April 2011 attack "when an Iraqi soldier threw a grenade at me. The day before the attack, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad told us that the Iraqi forces were going to launch an operation. Despite our pleas to the commander of U.S. forces to stay, his unit was ordered out of the camp. That left us completely defenseless in the face of a massive assault by the Iraqi forces."

Al-Maliki wrote at the end of 2011: "I would like to see this complex issue (Ashraf) resolved peacefully and with the help of the United Nations. The camp's residents are classified as a terrorist organization by many countries and thus have no legal basis to remain." Unfortunately, his words are hollow. Four days before the second massacre at Ashraf, he assured American diplomats in Baghdad that he would not attack the camp. He's now insisting the survivors all move to Camp Liberty.

UN Role

Al-Maliki has since agreed under international pressure not to attack Ashraf for a further period, although its length is now unclear. Offering to bring a number of the residents to Canada might encourage other governments to extend a similar

offer, thereby providing enough international pressure to obtain sufficient time for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to process all refugee applicants.

In 1997, as a goodwill gesture to the new Khatami government in Tehran, the Clinton administration added the PMOI to the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Paul Martin as prime minister proscribed the PMOI in Canada in 2005; the Harper government recently extended the ban for another two years. In Europe, seven high courts have meanwhile ruled a similar designation "perverse" and removed it for all 27 EU governments. Despite the U.S. federal appeal court ruling in July 2010 ordering the designation to be reviewed, the U.S. State Department has yet to make a decision. The court has now ordered it to do so by March 25th (I believe).

Col. Gary Morsch, the former U.S. battalion surgeon at Ashraf, told a Congressional hearing last July: "There were no findings of any terrorist activities, illegal activities, coercion of (PMOI) members, hidden arms, or evidence that (they) were not fulfilling their agreement with the U.S. military to fully cooperate with and support (our) goals in Iraq." (Residents) "had come to Ashraf to voluntarily serve with the (PMOI) to establish a free and democratic Iran. It was with great sadness that I witnessed the abandonment of the residents of Camp Ashraf by the very government that asked me to risk my life to defend (them)."

Camp Liberty

In late January this year, a committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) called on the Iraqi government not to turn the former American base, Camp Liberty into a prison, and called on the UNHCR to end the long delay in determining the refugee status of all residents. PACE noted that the living conditions in the new location are far less bearable than initially promised. Freedom of movement is denied; there are increasing restrictions for residents.

Others stress that al-Maliki is already reneging on his signed agreement. Camp Liberty has no running water, no electricity, no infrastructure; the allocated size has shrunk from 40 to one square kilometre. Concrete walls are being erected. Residents who were in effect forced to move there on February 17th understandably feel betrayed by the UN assistant mission head in Iraq for declaring that the camp met 'humanitarian standards' and by the Obama administration for going along with it.

The United Nations organization as a whole has been woefully weak to date in dealing with safety and dignity issues involving Ashraf residents. More 'responsibility to protect' and respect for the UN founding documents and purposes are clearly required by the U.N., its Security Council and the international community if the present government in Bagdad's worst instincts are to be contained successfully.

The continuing fear of many of us is that Camp Liberty is morphing into a concentration camp to hold members of most probably the largest Iranian opposition movement before they are slaughtered or returned to the inhuman Tehran regime in chains. Thank you.