House of Commons
CANADA

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

SDIR • NUMBER 032 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, October 22, 2009

Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, October 22, 2009

● (1320)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): We are in session. We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is our 32nd meeting.

Our guest is Abbas Milani, the director of Iranian studies at Stanford University and a very patient man indeed for waiting while we deal with our technical issues.

Dr. Milani, would you begin your presentation?

Dr. Abbas Milani (Director of Iranian Studies, Stanford University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for having me. I apologize for all of the technical difficulties. It is, after all, black magic that you're sitting there, I'm sitting here, and we are conversing and seeing each other's pictures.

I thought what I would do is begin with brief comments and then, hopefully, try to answer any questions that members of the committee would have.

I think your government is well aware that the Iranian regime, unfortunately, has had one of the bleakest records on human rights. If you look at the last 30 years of the history of this regime, there have been moments of respite and moments of true revolutionary terror.

The early years were prominent in the sense of mass killings. One of the most infamous of these was the 1988 killings of prisoners who were serving time for other crimes. It was decided that the prisons must be cleansed of potential opponents. These people were given summary trials and at least 4,000 of them were executed in what I think is one of the bleakest moments in modern Iranian history.

In the last few months, I think the regime has gone back to some of the atmospherics of that same dark period, although the number of people executed is far smaller. It's no more than, at the largest, 200. The number of arrested, at the largest, is no more than 4,000, and many of those have already been arrested.

But I think there are two kinds of breaches of human rights that we must pay attention to. One is the overt kind of violence that this regime engages in, such as imprisoning people or executing a minor for a crime that he committed when he was only 15 years old.

Then there is the slow grind of the daily abuses and inequities that are forced on the Iranian society, on the Iranian youth. While world attention is mostly focused on the former kind, the violent kind of the abuse of human rights, I think we must also be conscious of this other more sinister, more pervasive, and more constant form of abuse.

More specifically, I am talking about an abuse of human rights that is systematic, that is legal, and that is pervasive throughout the society. I'm talking about the oppression of religious minorities, of pressures particularly on members of the Baha'i faith, who are not even recognized as a religious community. There also are pressures on ethnic minorities. They face an inability to speak their languages and an inability to have their classes. As well, there is the disproportionate amount of money spent at the centre and the lesser amount money that is spent in these areas on the periphery.

I think that when we add all of these together we get a picture of a regime that I think is in constant breach of human rights against the people of Iran. Unfortunately, since June 12 and what I think was an electoral heist, these breaches have increased. The regime feels more isolated, the regime feels weaker, and as is always the case when these kinds of regimes are frightened, they show their more brutal side.

It is my hope that the international community, in its understandable eagerness to engage with the regime on the nuclear issue, will not forget the human rights issue and the democratic rights of the Iranian people. Ultimately, I think we have to accept, and we will realize, I think, that the only solution to the nuclear issue is also to have a more democratic Iran. There is no other solution, I think, to the democratic issue.

● (1325)

If we pay more heed to the human rights abuses and support more vigorously the democratic rights of the Iranian people, I think we will also be helping to find a structural, strategic solution to the nagging problem of the nuclear issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Milani.

We'll now turn to questions from our panel. Because of the short time we have, I'm going to have to limit us to one round of questions. Members of each party have to decide whether they're going to share their questions or how to divide their time. The questions and answers will be seven minutes in each case.

That said, Mr. Silva, please go ahead.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Dr. Milani. I apologize for the delay.

I was pleased that you talked about the different minority groups, particularly the Baha'is, which is something that we as a committee have been looking at. We have been very much preoccupied with what's happening with the Baha'is.

A variety of minority groups in Iran are being persecuted. Given some of the latest news on what's happening in Pakistan with the Baluchi ethnic community—and we know there are Baluchis in Iran—is there unrest that you're aware of in the Baluchi community in Iran, which borders Pakistan?

Dr. Abbas Milani: Yes, we have known for some time now that the Baluchi region of Iran is one of the poorest, the most neglected, and the most cursed with the problem of drugs, because it is one of the places in which Afghani opium goes to the Persian Gulf and from there to Europe

There are two ways for the heroin and opium to travel, and of course some of it stays in Iran. I'm sure you have heard about the new UN study that came out just yesterday and shows that Iran, next to Russia, or along with Russia, tops the countries of the world in the number of addicts using heroin and opium. For that reason Baluchistan, with some two million people, has become more or less a militarized region. The Revolutionary Guards have taken it over.

One of the most recent incidents was an attempt by the Revolutionary Guard command structure in Baluchistan to meet with some of the Baluchi elders to try to see if they can find a resolution to these ongoing tensions that exist in Baluchistan. Unfortunately, a suicide bomber entered that meeting and killed 40 people, including some very high-ranking members.

For the Baluchi, it's both because they are an ethnic minority and because they are Sunnis. Again, one of the problems in Iran is that the majority of the Muslims are Shiite, but there is a considerable minority that is Sunni. Some of the more radical elements of Shiism would not mind triggering or reopening old wounds in terms of Shiite-Sunni tensions.

That's why the Baluchi problem is particularly important. Because if it gets out of hand, then you will have a resurgence of the Sunni-Shiite bloodletting that has been an unfortunate part of the history of Iran and the Islamic world.

It's not just the Baluchis, but also the Kurds, Turks, Turkomans, and Arab-speaking Iranians, who are all minorities living in Iran's periphery, who have had their rights ignored in one way or another. Their fair share of the government budget, their right to celebrate their local culture, and their right to teach in their language have all been ignored.

Added to that is the fact that many of these minorities, many of the Kurds, Arab speakers, and Baluchis, are also Sunnis. That together, this combination of being an ethnic “other” and a religious “other”, has made it so that these areas of the periphery are both ignored and now under virtual military clampdown by the Revolutionary Guards, particularly the Baluchistan region.

● (1330)

The Chair: Mr. Silva, you still have a little bit of time left.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you.

I take it from your presentation, then, that given what's taken place, particularly with the suicide bombing and the killing of one of the top leaders of the Revolutionary Guards, and with a further government crackdown, there's going to be a further crackdown and violations of human rights in the next little while, and that situation is probably going to get worse, not better.

Dr. Abbas Milani: I would be very surprised if there are not more executions and more attacks on this group. The Revolutionary Guard command structure, as well as Mr. Khamenei himself, within the last week have threatened as much. They have openly said they're going to take harsh, retaliatory measures against this.

Unfortunately, I think we are going to see more bloodletting in that region, and it's going to get even worse because the cycle will go on. One bloodletting will beget another bloodletting, because again there are indications that the recent attack on this congregation, on this meeting, was retribution or payback for the fact that the brother of Mr. Rigi, the leader of this Jundallah that operates in the Pakistani region of Baluchistan, was executed by the Iranian regime. It was a very public execution just a few weeks ago. This might well be a kind of payback for that.

So one cycle begets another cycle, each becoming more vicious, and in the meantime the human rights of the innocent bystanders are constantly abused.

The Chair: Unfortunately that uses up the time for that question.

Monsieur Dorion, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Dr. Milani, we have seen economic changes in Iran in recent decades. A larger middle class has emerged as compared with 30 years ago. Something we observed during the last election is that women are starting to play a bigger role in challenging the political regime. Some demonstrations were held during the election campaign to fight for women's freedoms in Iran.

Can you take us through how things have evolved over time? Where do women's rights currently stand in Iran? What can we expect from current events regarding the place of women in Iranian society?

● (1335)

[*English*]

Dr. Abbas Milani: Thank you very much.

I think you are pointing to one of the most important issues in Iran's human rights scene, both in terms of the abuse and in terms of the struggle against the abuse.

One of the first laws of the *ancien régime* that Ayatollah Khomeini overturned was the family protection law. The Shah's regime had tried to make some changes, some reforms, in the family protection law to afford women more rights. The clergy were opposed to this when it was being discussed in 1970, and one of Ayatollah Khomeini's first gestures was to declare that null and void.

What that meant was that from then on, Islamic law would be applied to women, which meant that women would be denied judgeships. Shirin Ebadi, whose daughter is a guest in your country, the Nobel Prize laureate and the first Iranian woman judge, was immediately removed from her seat, as were other judges like her.

The right of divorce was completely given to men. Men were allowed to have four wives; they were allowed to have an infinite number of concubines; custody was now completely, more or less, in favour of men. A girl under the age of seven and a boy under the age of two stayed with the mother, and after that they went to the father or the father's family. In Islamic law, the father's family has more rights to a child than the mother does.

The custody laws, as well as inheritance laws and laws about community property, were completely scuttled. There was no community property. There was no payment of money. The only money a woman would get upon divorce would be what was written in the contractual agreement at the time of marriage.

Women did not take this lightly. They began to fight and push back. The age of marriage was brought down to nine for girls. Girls were allowed to marry at the age of nine, but as I said, women's organizations began to push back. They began to fight. Even some women within the regime realized that these laws were really unacceptable for the 20th and 21st centuries. They too began to fight back and push back. Some of those initial and most egregious laws were reformed—for example, the age of marriage is now back up to 14 for girls—but structural inequalities exist in the law.

I think women have been the most relentless fighters for human rights and for equal rights in the last 30 years of history. When the history of Iranian democracy and the Iranian human rights movement is written, I think we will realize and conclude that women were the most relentless champions. It was, to a great extent, the women's social networks created in the campaign for a million signatures that were used by the democratic opposition during the election to organize those massive, incredibly well-organized demonstrations, when three million came out. Some of the most important social networks, the computer networks, were used and developed earlier by the campaign for equal rights for women.

I think women are a remarkable measure of where Iranian society stands. The regime and its stalwarts are trying to push back and are trying to implement as many laws as possible. These laws—the right of the man to have four wives and an infinite number of concubines, the right of the man to divorce a woman at will, and many, many others—might have been progressive for their time 1,400 years ago in Arabia, but they're not progressive today.

● (1340)

We can spend a whole session talking about this. But women are not taking it and are struggling against it. I think they deserve much, much more credit for resisting the abuses, the systematic abuses of human rights, by this regime.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Dr. Milani, it's a pleasure to have you here today.

Listening to you talk a moment ago about the Sunni-Shia conflict and the potential there, I recall being in Saudi Arabia in 1969 for six months. During that period, I saw at a distance some of the conflicts happening at the grassroots level, just worker to worker. You referred to how women are held back, and I recall a class of women in a university there. If they were taught by a man, he had to be in the next room and on camera only; he couldn't be in the same room.

We avoided the souks and the central mosque on Fridays because that's when they were removing people's hands. On occasion, there were beheadings.

So I have a little bit of first-hand knowledge, but I'm concerned when I hear you talk about that conflict, because we had the conflict between Iraq and Iran a number of years ago. If the conflict takes on that religious split, could it not spill over into Iraq and even perhaps into Saudi Arabia?

I'll go a little further before you respond. A professor at McMaster University in my hometown of Hamilton, Reza Nejat, raised with me his concerns about the enclave of the People's Mujahideen in regard to how they're Iraq under American protection and what might happen to them once the Americans begin to withdraw. If you could answer that as well, I'd appreciate it.

Thank you, sir.

Dr. Abbas Milani: I think one of the most troubling issues on the horizon is the attempt by radicals on both sides, Sunni and Shiite, to foment this trouble. Almost 50 years ago now, the highest Shiite authority, Ayatollah Boroujerdi, and the highest Sunni authority, Sheikh Shaltut, the mufti of Al Assad University in Cairo, decided to write a very historic document that basically said Shiism is an accepted school of Islam. Till then, the Sunnis did not accept Shiism as an acceptable interpretation of Islam. That began to heal this wound that had existed for many, many centuries.

In recent weeks, for example, Mr. Qardavi, one of the most popular television personalities in the Arab world and the Sunni world issued a declaration that says the Shiites are heretics. Some of the more radical Iranian Shiites responded by declaring Wahhabism, which is a form of Shiism in Saudi Arabia, a form of heresy.

We know that both the Iranian regime and the Saudi regime are spending billions of dollars promoting their versions of Islam throughout the world, and Wahhabism particularly is very, very exclusivist in its interpretation of Islam. If they become dominant, and there is a lot of indication that they might, I think we are in for a long night of resurgence of this Shiite-Sunni bloodletting.

If it happens, and I hope it doesn't—I hope that wiser, cooler heads will prevail—you're absolutely right: it will flow into Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait, In all of these countries of the Persian Gulf, there is a very substantial Shiite minority. In Saudi Arabia, the Shiites are at 20%, but they live in the most important oil-rich regions of Saudi Arabia. If the Iranian regime decides to foment these into a sort of rising Shiite arc, I think it is going to be a major threat. I'm still hopeful that they will pull back and that wiser heads will prevail.

As to the mujahedeen, as you know, the mujahedeen were a group of Iranians. They began as a terrorist organization in Iran in 1964. They engaged in several acts of terrorism against the *ancien régime*, including the killing of some Americans. Then they became an ally of the Islamic Republic. Then they had a falling-out with the Islamic Republic and took up arms against the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic slaughtered them, truly, in one of the egregious breaches of human rights. When I talked about the 4,000 people killed in prison, many of those 4,000 were imprisoned members of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, because the regime was concerned.

But the mujahedeen did something that put them very much, I would say, on the outs with the Iranian population, which was that they settled in Iraq when Iraq was fighting Iran and began helping the Iraqi regime when the Iraqi regime was attacking Iran, so they lost a lot of their credibility. When Saddam Hussein fell, the U.S. government offered these people protected status. That meant that they needed to have protection; they couldn't engage in political activity.

● (1345)

But the Shiite leaders of Iraq, many of whom are very close to the regime in Iran, have been insistent on trying either to send some of the mujahedeen back to Iran or to kick them out of Iraq. While the U. S. had control over the Ashraf camp where these people were, they were treated with dignity and with the right attitude. When the Iraqi government took over, they went into these camps with full force, I suspect with the instigation of the Iranian regime. There are indications that these people are being beaten.

Although I do not accept the politics of the mujahedeen and think they are more of a cultic phenomenon than a legitimate political group, I think their human rights need to be respected. I think they should have been given all the legal protection that any human being deserves, and I don't think the Iraqi government did that. I think the international community must be as concerned about breaches of these people's human rights as it would be for breaches of the human rights of any other minority anywhere in the world.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll turn to our next questioner. Is it Mr. Hiebert or Mr. Sweet who will start?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Chairman, it is my hope that we'll get one question each.

Dr. Milani, it's good to see you. Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your testimony today.

I want to read a direct quote from *The Economist*. I do so almost hesitantly, because you've mentioned already that this regime has almost gone back to the dark days of 1988, and that concerns me.

Let me read this quote from this *Economist* article and then ask you a question regarding it. It states: A lot of ordinary Iranians, including many who used to back the conservatives, scorn Mr Ahmadinejad's claim to have foiled a foreign plot. Instead, they have added charges of the rape, murder and slander of its opponents to the regime's alleged initial sin of massive voting fraud in the June election. Some argue that the scale and brutality of the regime's crackdown reflect not strength but desperation. With internet and satellite airwaves still evading state control, large-scale unrest could yet erupt...

The key question I'd like to ask you regarding that quote is whether you agree with the opinion that's been given. Is there a chance that there would be some large-scale action again and some hope in the future?

● (1350)

Dr. Abbas Milani: I think *The Economist* has caught the sentiments of the Iranian people very accurately. In the e-mails I have received in the last few days, for example, that sentiment is very much reflected. In particular, what people in Iran feel today is that the regime is making nice on the nuclear issue on a tactical basis to allow it to have a free hand to go at the democratic opposition because that's where they see the main threat.

Once they have cleaned house, brought this thing under control, and suppressed this movement, my sense is that they will then go back and renege on whatever nuclear agreements they have made. They haven't succeeded yet; the opposition has not given up yet, and every day there is something new happening, either at the university or in some city. But the Iranian people are truly worried that's what the regime is up to: playing nice on the nuclear issue in order to use that respite to go after the democratic opposition, arrest the rest of the leadership that hasn't been arrested, and show even more brutality than they have now.

My sense, however, is that the regime is facing a crisis unlike any it has had in its life, because not only is it facing the wrath of the Iranian people but, for the first time, it is also broken right in the middle in its own ranks. If you think about this regime, it really has had three main architects: Khomeini, Rafsanjani, and Khamenei. These are the three people who built this and kept the system going. Now, the two survivors, Khamanei and Rafsanjani, are standing opposed to one another and are fighting one another. This is a rift unlike anything this regime has ever faced.

There are indications that some Revolutionary Guard commanders are not in line with this policy of complete suppression. There is clear evidence that they are doing a major purge in the intelligence ministry. It is reported that of 20,000 employees, they are about to retire or buy out or force out 6,000 of them. These people do not accept the theory that the entire democratic movement was a concoction of the west, a concoction of American and Canadian universities.

I think the regime might want to go back to those dark days and complete the clampdown. I'm not sure, however, that they have the wherewithal to do it. The split within the regime is strong enough and deep enough that it might stop that.

What I fear most, to be honest with you—and I've written about this—is that the Revolutionary Guards will take over in a fashion that will resemble the Myanmar or Pakistan version of a military clampdown. I think that holding power is so important to the Revolutionary Guards that if they feel they are losing control, they might do something like Musharraf in Pakistan or the junta in Myanmar. They would take over and suspend all civil rights and the constitution.

● (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hiebert, did you have a question?

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you.

We are drafting a report with recommendations and I would like to get your thoughts on what concrete steps Canada could take to influence positively the human rights situation in Iran. That's the first question.

Second, do you believe it's better to take diplomatic or commercial engagement on the one hand, or coercion through sanctions and condemnation on the other hand? Do you think the carrot or the stick approach is more effective or would a combination of both be better?

Dr. Abbas Milani: Let me begin with the second one. I have never believed that the sanctions have worked, but I have written many times that the sanctions seem to help the regime.

When the regime has $80 billion to $100 billion in oil revenues to play with; when it has China, Russia, India, the United Arab Emirates, and even some European companies willing to help it; and when the regime has an estimated 40,000 companies based in the United Arab Emirates whose sole job is to buy embargoed commodities, bring them into the United Arab Emirates, and then ship them across the channel to Iran, then embargoes seem to play into the hands of the regime, because they offer an excuse for its incompetence. They offer an excuse for its absolutely embarrassing corruption and incompetence.

The only kind of sanction that works against this regime is a sanction that we can't get, because I don't think China or Russia will ever agree to it. It's the kind of sanction that was used against South Africa; in other words, it would be a sanction that would end the buying of oil and gas from Iran. Oil and gas sales are the source of 70% of the government's revenue, and some people estimate up to 80%. If the world stops buying oil and gas from Iran, this government will listen to anything the world has to say. Otherwise, limited kinds of embargoes just play into the hands of the regime and allow the most corrupt elements of the regime to become even richer.

Again, I have always been for negotiations with this regime. I have never believed that not talking to this regime is a policy. Not talking is not a policy; not talking is a failure of having a policy. My suggestion has been, and still is, that the west must talk to this regime, but it must talk with this regime with the issues of human rights and the democratic rights of the people on the table, front and centre.

The example that I have often given in the past is the example of how Reagan, after two years of not negotiating with the Soviet Union, decided to resume negotiating with them. He did negotiate with them, but he also kept the Helsinki issues—the human rights issues, the dissident issues—part of the discussion. Unless human rights and democratic rights are kept part of the discussion, the Iranian democrats, the Iranian citizens, will think that the west has sold them in return for a promise on the nuclear issue or the oil issue. That would be detrimental to the future of the democratic movement in Iran.

The democratic movement in Iran needs, I think, to know that the west is aware of its existence and aware of its legitimacy, and to know that while the west is pursuing its own interests, as it should, and negotiating with this regime on the nuclear issue, it will not “do a Libya”, or what the Iranians now call “the Libya syndrome”. This syndrome says that if Libya gives up its nuclear program, then its egregious errors and breaches of human rights are going to be forgotten, and that Libya's leader will be treated with kid gloves, will be invited to the capitals of the west, and will not be treated as the criminal he is, but, though an oddity and a quirky character, as the leader of a nation that needs to be welcomed.

My hope is that the Libya syndrome doesn't happen.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you. That completes the time we have allocated for questions.

We're very grateful that you were able to attend, Dr. Milani. We apologize again for the problems that occurred with the technical side of things and appreciate your patience. Thank you very much.

Are there any final comments you would like to make?

Dr. Abbas Milani: My last point is that I feel very privileged to be with you. The fact that people like you exist in the world and care about the human rights of the Iranian people is a very heartening and promising thing. We owe you a great debt of gratitude. I thank you on behalf of every person who is in prison. Their hope of freedom is with you.

The Chair: We hope we can be of some small assistance in that regard.

Thank you very much, Dr. Milani.

This ends the meeting. Thank you.

We're adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Additional copies may be obtained from: Publishing and Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Telephone: 613-941-5995 or 1-800-635-7943
Fax: 613-954-5779 or 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: http://www.parl.gc.ca

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

On peut obtenir des copies supplémentaires en écrivant à : Les Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5
Téléphone : 613-941-5995 ou 1-800-635-7943
Télécopieur : 613-954-5779 ou 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : http://www.parl.gc.ca