



House of Commons
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 034 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, October 29, 2009

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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

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• (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order.

[Translation]

This is the 34th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We are continuing our study of human rights in Iran.

Before I turn things over to our witness, I'll mention that there were several witnesses who were on the list of proposed witnesses. Our clerk conscientiously contacted them and they indicated to us that they did not want to attend. The clerk was unsuccessful in getting contact with one proposed witness despite repeated attempts.

This means that Professor Akhavan will be our last witness in these hearings. This means, in turn, that on Tuesday we will be moving to a review of the parts of the report that have been written. My intention is to get everybody to give their suggestions for changes and improvements to our researchers, who will then take them away during the break, along with the material relating to the elections and the fallout at the elections, and come back to us at the first meeting following the break.

That leaves next Thursday free. That's a week from today. I propose that we go in camera and discuss future business. To that end, our clerk has a copy of all of the proposals that people have made with regard to potential future topics.

All that being said, I now turn to our witness. We have quite a distinguished witness today. Payam Akhavan is a professor of international law at McGill University.

Sir, your name has been suggested by members of all parties. I think it's very fortunate, from our point of view, that you are indeed our last witness and are able to put a finishing touch on the hearings we've been having.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Dr. Payam Akhavan (Professor of International Law, McGill University, As an Individual): Mr. Chair, colleagues and friends, I

thank you for inviting me. It is a great pleasure and privilege to share with you some ideas on the state of human rights in Iran.

[English]

I'm sincerely very grateful that this subcommittee has chosen to give such consideration to the situation in Iran at a very crucial time. In all the times that I've had the privilege of appearing before this body, I feel that never before has this issue been more crucial, as Canada tries to identify how it can contribute to the resolution of one of the most crucial foreign policy challenges of our time.

For the past several years, you will be aware that I and a number of other human rights advocates have spoken about civil society and democratization as the only solution for the current problem confronting Iran. It so happens that just before the fateful events of this summer, many individuals, in the name of political realism, held the view that President Ahmadinejad and the hard-liners were here to stay, that we must be realistic, and that we must approach this government with the policy of engagement.

The unforgettable scenes from the streets of Tehran and other cities this summer, in what many of us call Iran's "Ghandian moment", should leave no doubt that President Ahmadinejad does not speak for the people of Iran, that his is not the only voice that the international community should listen to, and that the future leaders of Iran are not those who tenuously hold onto power today.

This is not a question of a McGill law professor speaking with naive idealism. This is the hard reality that was played out in the streets of Iran, which momentarily has been in retreat because of a brutal crackdown, but which, I assure you, is just the beginning of the democratic struggle of the people of Iran.

I'm proud to say that in the international community Canada has had by far the most principled approach, and I'm here today to try to encourage the government to move further in the direction of exercising leadership with this issue, at a time when the United States and European governments are pursuing a policy that is detrimental to the human rights and democratic struggle within Iran.

First of all, I think we should be aware that the human rights violations that have taken place in Iran over the past few months in relation to the repression of the demonstration have yet to be fully understood in terms of their scale and gravity. I'm proud that the Department of Foreign Affairs has given a modest grant to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center to provide an investigative report on this matter, which hopefully will be submitted to the UN Human Rights Council when it considers Iran's human rights record under the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva early next year.

I want to share with you some of the examples of the reports that we have received, sometimes of people that I've known as friends and colleagues. We've all seen the horrific sight of Neda Agha-Soltan, the 27-year-old girl whose crime was standing in the streets at the time of the demonstration, who was shot in the chest by a member of the Basij militia, and who shed her blood before the whole world as it watched in this Twitter revolution, where we have had unprecedented use of technology by these brave young people who are so desperate for change that they're willing to brave the prospect of being murdered, tortured, or raped in order to bring about change.

Neda Agha-Soltan is but one soul whose murder was captured on camera. Without an opportunity to document yet what has happened to them, we have no idea of how many hundreds have been murdered in even worse circumstances. Amir Javadifar, a 24-year-old youth who was also arrested for being in the protests, had his corpse delivered to his mother with a fractured skull and a crushed eyeball, while all his fingernails and toenails had been extracted. A 15-year-old boy who was arrested for wearing a green wristband—that was his crime—was held in solitary confinement for 20 days and brutally gang-raped by the Basij militia.

● (1315)

I could go on, but I think it's important that we don't reduce the issue to abstractions and statistics in order to understand the horrible brutality with which the Iranian government has confronted what is essentially a peaceful, non-violent movement to call for basic human rights and democracy.

We have to consider that the cast of characters now involved in the show trials and tortures are the very same characters that have enjoyed impunity throughout the past 30 years in the Islamic Republic, including Saeed Mortazavi, who by now is notorious before this committee as one of those implicated in the murder of Zahra Kazemi. He is involved in the interrogation of these protesters. Their confessions are extracted through torture and all manner of systematic abuses.

The Iranian government's position is that 20 to 30 people, at most, were killed in these protests. We are in the process of trying to determine the extent of the killings at a time when journalists are being imprisoned. We know about Maziar Bahari, the Canadian *Newsweek* journalist, and what is now being done with journalists, many of whom fear for their lives.

It's very difficult in this atmosphere to determine the exact extent of the murders. What we know is that many families have been told that the bodies of their children will be returned to them only if they sign a form indicating that they died of natural causes. We know that

many people have yet to receive the bodies of their children, because they were hurriedly buried in unmarked graves.

We know of one location in southwest Tehran. It's a cold storage facility that's used for fruit and vegetables. According to two witnesses—a mother who was there to pick up the body of her child and had to look through a picture book to identify her son, and a woman who was responsible for washing dead bodies at the cemetery south of Tehran—there were at least 300 bodies in that cold storage facility in the southwest of Tehran. This begins to indicate the extent of the crimes against humanity that have been committed against the people of Iran.

I will now turn to my main point: what is the position of the international community, and what can it do to help the democratic transition in Iran?

It's unfortunate that I have to say that the United States government recently announced that it has cut all funding to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. The same applies to a number of other human rights and democratic initiatives, including Gozaar, which was a website supported by Freedom House in Washington, D.C., simply to educate the Iranian public about democracy and human rights.

The message being sent today is that so long as Iran cooperates on the nuclear issue, everything else is off the table. It should not be surprising that just a few days after the P5-plus-one meeting in Geneva, President Ahmadinejad suddenly said that he was willing to cooperate in the enrichment of uranium abroad. It remains to be seen if one can trust such promises, but just a few days after that meeting, the first of several death sentences against protest leaders was handed down by the courts in Iran.

The Iranian government is watching and calculating how much it can get away with. If the message of the international community is that cooperation on the nuclear issue would mean acquiescence in all manner of atrocities, then the hard-liners, as they try to consolidate their grip, will execute and torture as many people as they can get away with.

We should have no illusions about their capacity to do that. Those of us who know about the mass execution of approximately 5,000 political prisoners in 1988 should not suffer under the illusion that the regime will not do whatever it takes to survive and stay in power.

● (1320)

Leaving aside the moral imperative of supporting a people struggling for democracy and human rights, it is the height of naïveté to believe that there will be any regional stability in the Middle East so long as a militarized regime that is at war with its own people continues to stay in power. The chants of the people on the streets of Tehran and other cities are the best indication of what this non-violent democratic movement represents.

Recently, in the annual anti-Israel marches that take place in Iran—they're called Quds day celebrations, "Quds" referring to Jerusalem—when the government representatives chanted "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" into microphones, the hundreds of thousands of those assembled chanted back "Death to Russia" and "Death to China", which they see as propping up the regime of President Ahmadinejad against the will of the Iranian people.

One of the slogans on the streets now is: "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon; I will only sacrifice my life for Iran". What are they saying? They're saying that they are tired of hate-mongering and the use of imaginary external enemies as a way of crushing internal dissent and that they want to live in peace with their neighbours.

As for any momentary concessions in this militarized regime, I say militarized regime because all the key members of the cabinet now are members of the Sepah-e, the Revolutionary Guards. This is now a military regime. One can imagine that a regime that uses such appalling violence against its own people will not hesitate to project its power abroad, also through violence.

I will end by, first of all, expressing my profound gratitude to the Canadian government for once again providing leadership at the General Assembly on the adoption of a resolution on Iran.

I would also like to appeal to the Government of Canada to consider stepping in where the U.S. government has stopped support for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center and to consider, through its support for the documentation of these abuses, holding these individuals accountable, to send a clear message that this government and these people will continue to persist in their principled approach, even if momentarily the mood is one of appeasement.

Thank you very much.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Akhavan.

We have 35 minutes. This allows us one seven-minute round of questions and answers and one five-minute round of questions and answers. We'll start with the Liberals, and I'm assuming that means we'll start with Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I just want to thank the witness, Professor Akhavan, for an excellent presentation. I want to echo the words you mentioned, Mr. Chairman. We are fortunate that he is here to help us wrap up these hearings and to provide a conceptual appreciation as we go on to write the report on the condition of human rights in Iran today and the role the Canadian government can play in exercising principled leadership.

On that point, there are some questions I'd like to put to Professor Akhavan. Canada once again will be co-sponsoring a resolution on human rights at the UN General Assembly. Do you believe that the resolution this year should have specific and expressed reference to the matters to which you referred? Also, should it be attended by a recommendation for sanctions?

I find it somewhat surprising that the only sanctions resolutions that have been passed thus far have been resolutions of the UN Security Council in relation to the nuclear issue. It is, yet again, another example of the sanitizing of the human rights violations as

we focus on the nuclear. Indeed, I don't want for a moment to say that one should not be focusing on the nuclear; I'm saying that only focusing on the nuclear tends to result in emboldening the government and marginalizing the opposition as we sanitize the human rights abuses.

So first, how might the resolution be refined and enhanced?

Second, should Canada, for example, list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity or adopt sanctions specifically targeting them since they are at the core of much of the criminal mischief in Iran today?

Third, do you have some suggestions as to how Canada might target the Iranian energy infrastructure and companies that may be based in Canada and are otherwise dealing with that infrastructure, to again, on the principle of accountability, hold those who need to be held accountable so accountable?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, Professor Cotler.

If I may, distinguished colleagues, I will answer these three questions in order.

First of all, if I may just digress briefly, the question of nuclear capability is not the issue; it's the nature of the regime.

Japan, Brazil, Korea, and Argentina are all countries with nuclear capability, which we do not worry about because they have responsible democratic governments. Sooner or later, Iran will acquire nuclear technology. The technology is becoming only more accessible, so in the long run it's the nature of the regime that will solve the nuclear issue.

In that respect, as you point out, the UN Security Council, in resolution 1747, has imposed targeted sanctions against individuals and companies involved in Iran's nuclear program, but it has adopted no such targeted sanctions with respect to those responsible for crimes against humanity.

The one issue that President Ahmadinejad has to unite the Iranian people behind him is the nuclear issue. That makes him the champion of Iranian sovereignty against what he portrays as western domination. We need to make the international community partners with the Iranian democratic opposition by saying that our first consideration is democracy and human rights, on the understanding that this will solve the question of whatever threat Iran poses in the region.

This brings me to the question of Sepah-e, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Basij militia that were responsible for the atrocities that we witnessed on the streets. Iran is now a security state. It is a security state in which billions of dollars of Iran's oil wealth and other centres of economic power are monopolized by these forces and used to basically keep the hardliners in power.

I would suggest, for instance, that the members of Sepah-e and Basij be declared inadmissible to Canada under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. There is no reason that any of the members of these security forces should be allowed into Canada when they've been responsible for so many crimes. We have to also think about the security implications for Canada of having these networks operating freely.

In terms of energy companies, the question of sanctions is very delicate. We do not want to make the life of ordinary Iranians more difficult than it already is. In principle, targeted sanctions identify those individuals who are responsible for these violations and help empower the democratic opposition. The democratic movement in Iran needs to know that the world stands with them and that moral encouragement is one of the most important things it can do.

One could at least reward certain companies, which I will not name, but companies that have withdrawn from Iran because of their opposition to the current climate. At the very least, one could see how good behaviour can be rewarded to the extent that it is within the scope of power of the Canadian government.

• (1330)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Thi Lac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Thank you, professor, to be with us here today.

You have partially answered some of my questions, but I still want to put you some questions in order to have more information.

As we know, Canada is not a member of the P5+1 group and it is not located in the same area of the world as Iran. We do not have any significant trade with this country. Given this situation, what influence could Canada exert on Iran?

When you appeared in front of the subcommittee in March 2007, you said and I quote: The average Iranian does not wake up in the morning fantasizing about nuclear capability or about wiping Israel off the map. This is an expedient of President Ahmadinejad because this kind of polemic is the only thing he can offer the Iranian people as they decline further and further into hopelessness, social despair and economic decline.

You also said that our policy toward Iran should be focussed directly on human rights within the country and not only on the foreign policy of Iran.

Has your view on this evolved or has it stayed the same as in your testimony of March 2007, given what has happened in Iran in the past two years?

In a report published in *Maclean's*, you say that to put the focus on the nuclear issue in Iran was a mistake. You have explained to us in length why this is so, but do you have anything to add?

Also, in your remarks, you talked about yesterday's statements made by the president and his openness to cooperation. I would like to know whether you have anything to add to this.

These are my four questions. I will give you the rest of my time to explain your points of view.

Mr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you.

I will first answer the question dealing with the nuclear program.

• (1335)

[English]

As I explained, the nuclear issue is very complex and I'm not here as an expert on that issue. But the fact is that a regime that does not rule through legitimacy is more vulnerable than a regime with a democratic mandate. A regime that feels vulnerable is more likely to resort to militarization as a way of preserving its interests, both within the country and externally. One could speak about the long history of regimes that have projected their foreign policy through militaristic means by virtue of their internal political dynamics.

The reason we have had millions of people coming onto the streets of Iran is the desperation of people there. The unemployment rate now is about 25% in Iran. The underemployment rate, if one includes it too, is about 40% in a country where 70% of the population is 30 years of age and under. They are no longer satisfied with ideological debates and the revolutionary slogans of the regime. They are educated. They have satellite television and they have the Internet. They know what the world has to offer and they want hope for the future.

When young people are willing to get murdered in the streets, it's not because they're fanatics; it's because they have no hope. They're desperate. They would rather get killed than remain silent. That is the reality in a situation where billions of dollars of oil wealth are going to prop up this elaborate security apparatus. Sending up those rockets, having a nuclear program, and paying the Basij and Sepah-e and all of those security forces is costing billions of dollars. Iran is the second biggest exporter of oil in the world, but half of the population now lives below the poverty line.

This is the way in which the lack of democracy, the lack of accountability, and the human rights abuses, corruption, economic mismanagement, and crony capitalism all relate to the nuclear issue. It's the one issue the regime still has to rally the masses against an enemy, which, as we know, is the first thing any authoritarian leader needs.

It's in that context that I refer to the chants in the street to explain that the people have woken up to these lies and deceptions. They say they want jobs and education. They say they want the police out of their universities and their schools. "We want to have freedom," they say, "and we want to have hope". They're saying that they don't care about Hamas and Hezbollah and all of these other things that are constantly being fed to the Iranian people.

Finally, the question of commercial ties, as I said, is very delicate, as one would not want to make life more difficult for the Iranian people. Obviously, if there are, let's say, agricultural products being sold to Iran, I would not say that one should try to oppose that sort of trade. One needs to think very carefully about what impact sanctions are going to have on those we want to pay the price for the violations.

But there are clearly other areas. I was in Berlin recently and found out, for example, that a German weapons manufacturer had sold many of the weapons that have been used to kill people in the recent protests. Siemens and Nokia were involved in selling surveillance technology to the intelligence ministry, through which they could listen to people's phone calls and follow their e-mails and then arrest and eventually torture them. This is the type of trade we absolutely have to put an end to. I would even say now that some people in Iranian civil society are talking about boycotting the companies that have been engaging in this sort of trade.

The Chair: That was exactly seven minutes on the nose.

We're looking for equal precision from you, Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Not a chance, Mr. Chair.

Welcome. We're very pleased to have you here.

You are making it terribly difficult for me, because I agree with practically every single thing you've said, which makes it a little difficult to come up with probing questions. I know that the Iranian people have a 5,000-year history and I know about their sense of democracy. I speak to them in Hamilton, some of whom have been there for 20 years now, and I go to some of their cultural events and see the richness of their culture.

Mr. Cotler hit on something very important about the nuclear issue. There is no other word for it but appeasement. As long as we get that taken care of, we close a blind eye. We had that kind of view in the U.S. for a long, long time towards South America and the regimes that functioned there. It reminds me of my father teaching me about picking up a snake: if you pick up the snake by the tail and you walk with it, you'd better watch the head all the time or you're going to get bitten. We're in that kind of situation.

As well, I agree with you on targeted sanctions to draw attention to human rights and to bring the conversation around to the human rights violations that are happening. Hopefully you have some further examples of how we could target them.

We've been waiting for two years now for the corporate social responsibility document to be tabled in this House. It applies mostly to mining companies, but do you know of Canadian oil companies who are dealing with the Iranian regime? That would be of interest to me.

Another question I have asked several times now is whether the demonstrations in Iran were joint Sunni-Shia demonstrations. Or were there splits along those lines? From the things I have heard, I have grave concerns regarding the potential for an explosion between those two facets of the religion.

I think there's enough there for you to comment on.

• (1340)

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir, for your kind words.

I'm not prepared at this point to say anything about Canadian companies investing in Iran because I would not want to make any suggestions without having thoroughly researched the matter, which I have not done. But once again, I think there has to be a nuanced

approach. There are certain sectors or types of trade in that economy that are problematic and others that are not.

What I can say is that Canada is extremely important to the Iranian community, both to the democrats and human rights activists who have made Canada their home and are proud members of this nation, and also among the elites of the regime who send their children to school here, who have major investments here, and who are also trying to lobby the members of this House of Commons for their own business and other interests. We know that the deputy president to Mr. Ahmadinejad, Mr. Mashaei, was in Canada in March of this year and met with business leaders in Toronto and other cities.

So this is an important place for Iran, which is also why there are so many informants and agents in this country, many of whom I've come to know. All of this is to say that we should take very seriously the leverage that Canada has.

I found out that the son of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, the spiritual mentor of President Ahmadinejad, a cleric who can only be described as an absolute fanatic and who makes the supreme leader look moderate by comparison, did his Ph.D. at McGill University. That university was called a centre of Zionism and Baha'ism in an article in a government newspaper attacking me. But it's good that the ayatollah is sending his son to a centre of Zionism and Baha'ism.

There are many, many very wealthy individuals in Toronto and Vancouver who are benefiting from this relationship, and we need to rethink how we as an immigrant nation should on the one hand benefit from people with skills and capital, but without becoming, effectively, a haven for criminality on the other hand.

As a final point, in regard to the Sunni-Shia divide, Iran is overwhelming Shiite. I believe that only about 15% to 20% of the population may be Sunni. But the whole problem in looking at the world through the prism of the Shiite-Sunni divide is assuming that all Iranians have the same identity. Iranians are Shiite, but they're also secular, and some of the Shiites are Azeri Turks and others are Persian-speaking Iranians. Also, the Jewish community in Iran is 4,000 years old. Iran is an incredibly diverse and complex society, and throughout its two and a half thousand years of civilization, it has thrived when it has respected its diversity.

The point is that it's the politicization of identity that creates these problems. A democratic Iran would not politicize identity. The Kurdish people, who are Sunni, want a democratic Iran. The Baluch, who are on the border with Pakistan and who are also Sunni, want a democratic Iran.

Once one creates that separation of state and religion and puts an end to authoritarian rule and the use of hate-mongering as an instrument of power, many of these issues will be resolved. So this essentialist view that these people are intrinsically Shiite or Sunni, that there are only these two types, a view that is presented by these forces, only makes myth into reality.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

You have one more minute if you'd like to use it, Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That was so comprehensive. I thought it covered it all really well.

I still come back to the issue of Canadian companies. While I don't wish to press you on them, it is a concern.

In your comments, I heard you very subtly talking about Canada being a haven for some criminals from that country. It would be very interesting to know who these folks are. I know that this is not the time or the place for that, but if we are becoming a haven for repulsive people who practise torture, it should be made known loud and clear to the people of Canada, who will take great offence at any government of ours that allows or supports that.

Probably a lot of what you've told us today is information that's been shared before in one way or another, but your point that Canada is a haven for this kind of criminality is very disturbing. I thank you for bringing it to our attention.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: If I may just clarify that point, today is the sentencing of Désiré Munyaneza, the Rwandan who was convicted of genocide. My distinguished colleague, Irwin Cotler, was the Attorney General when that case began. I think the question is one of allocating further resources to the RCMP and the Department of Justice so they can investigate these matters. It's fundamentally a question of resources.

I don't want to suggest that nothing is being done. I know that the Canada Border Services Agency takes measures to prevent such individuals from being admitted into Canada, but at the end of the day, Iran may have a different importance, given the current climate, than many other communities, whether we're talking about Guatemala or Yugoslavia and many other individuals who could be suspected of such activities. In this case, it's not just a question of prosecuting people or declaring them inadmissible on strictly human rights grounds. There are also security implications.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It was very important that the deputy was able to come and speak to business leaders and that those business leaders clearly understood who they were dealing with.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: These were Iranian business leaders who obviously knew exactly who they were speaking with.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sweet is next, with Mr. Silva on deck.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Professor Akhavan, thank you again for being here today. I have a couple of quick questions.

First, regarding the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, are you convinced that the primary motivation of the U.S. State Department to withdraw the funding was the appeasement of Ahmadinejad's regime to gain favour for the nuclear issue?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: It's difficult not to arrive at that conclusion, and I would be more than happy to be proven wrong, but it's not just our organization: it's a series of other organizations that are not based in Iran. They're not engaged in subversive activities. They're engaged in what are very innocuous and reasonable activities aimed at educating the public. The fact that all of them have now been denied funding makes it appear as if this is a policy shift. The official policy of support for civil society and human rights remains, but the practice seemingly has changed.

Of course, there may be partisan points being scored here, in that maybe any initiative started under the previous administration is now seen as being tainted one way or the other, but in the case of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, we received bipartisan support. As well, the message it is sending to human rights activists and democrats in Iran, as one of them told me, is that the doors are being shut in our face and we're being told that the world is standing with Ahmadinejad, not with us. That's very demoralizing.

I would hope the Canadian government, which I think has had the best policy in this regard, could potentially, at least as a symbolic message, step in and say that we are willing to support this initiative now. Maybe we can open an office in Canada. That could be the message this government sends to the people in Iran.

• (1350)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

You mentioned Siemens and Nokia and it was very troubling. While you didn't mention the name of the German weapons manufacturer, these were sales that were obviously for surveillance over a people who are already overwhelmingly subjected to a tyrannical regime. Are other companies that operate internationally and that would operate here in Canada involved in these kinds of sales as well?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: As I said, once again, I'm very cautious about making any statements until I have all my facts right. I'll be very frank with you: I don't have my facts right, so I will not speculate.

What I do know is that a third of Iran's trade is with the European Union. Germany, for the longest time, has been Iran's biggest trading partner, but now it is the United Arab Emirates, largely because it's a transit point. Everything they can't get through the sanctions they now get through the United Arab Emirates. There is a trade relationship worth €30 billion between the European Union and Iran.

We know, for example, that in the 1980s and 1990s, 260 Iranian dissidents were assassinated in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and throughout European capitals. Very rarely was there ever a prosecution. This is the legacy of Europe's relation with Iran. I was recently in Europe and spoke to members of the European Parliament who openly said that the so-called Iran human rights dialogue was a failure. It was a way of allowing both Iran and Europe to pretend there was a dialogue while the situation of human rights deteriorated in the meantime.

Some in Europe, including the French government, among others, are now willing to take a more decisive stand, but unfortunately it's at a time when the United States feels that because of the excesses of the Bush administration one way, they are now committing excesses the other way, which is equally problematic.

That's why I think Canada has such an important role internationally in regard to also sending a message to its European and American partners that this is the best approach toward Iran. It's the middle approach between military confrontation and appeasement, both of which are wrong.

Mr. David Sweet: We'll see if that U.S. position changes after the statement made by Ahmadinejad two hours ago regarding a need for a new deal around the nuclear concerns of the United Nations.

Lastly, you'd mentioned the Basij being involved in the crackdown on the civil uprising. Could you tell us a bit about this force, the Basij? Are they wholly subject to the supreme leader? Are they a renegade force? Could you just give us some more information on that?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: The Basij are clearly not a renegade force. I would compare them to the Nazi brownshirts. They are a security force composed of plainclothes thugs. The regime is very smart. They know that if you send in the army to shoot into crowds of peaceful demonstrators, you have a massacre, and the regime will collapse with that kind of open confrontation.

So their strategy is to infiltrate these crowds with plainclothes individuals who then, at the appropriate moment, begin to stab or club various individuals. You have savage beatings and savage stabbings. The message is very clear: it's terrorization. They want to send a message that protesting in the streets will be dealt with so harshly that it's not worth it for you to come out of your home and participate.

The Basij are a paramilitary unit under the Revolutionary Guards. The Revolutionary Guards are directly subordinate to the supreme leader. Just after the recent events, the Revolutionary Guards acquired the telecommunications company in Iran and they acquired one of the largest iron ore mines in the Middle East. So we're moving towards a military state that is dominating all the resources of the country for its own benefit. They have a network of patronage, which keeps people happy.

The Basij are not just volunteering to come and beat people; they're paid money. By some accounts, they're paid about \$200 a day for beating and stabbing people. When you have unemployed youths who are given \$200 a day, which is a lot of money, to come and beat people at will and who on occasion are allowed to rape people as a bonus, then you can see the way in which that regime of terror is

being sustained and how the structure of the economy is used to sustain this kind of authoritarian rule through terror.

• (1355)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

Is there any time left?

The Chair: No, unfortunately. That completes it.

Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): I have two questions. One of them has to do with the fallout from the last election, which I guess in some ways was a watershed moment. I think for many Iranians, it was a realization that the supreme leader was not neutral in that election. He really did take sides with the present regime. Has that led in many ways to a loss of credibility among those who are still loyal to the supreme leader but who at the same time were not necessarily loyal to Ahmadinejad?

Is there in fact a loss of confidence in the supreme leader? He is no longer a neutral sort of spiritual leader. Really, he belongs to a political faction that is in control of the process and therefore makes the whole process of having an election almost irrelevant in some ways.

The other question I have is this one. Lately we've heard about what is happening with the Baluchis and Baluchistan and so forth. I'm wondering if the minority communities within Iran are so frustrated at the moment that they feel taking up armed struggle is the only way they can in fact deal with some of the issues that are quite repressive to them?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, Mr. Silva, for those very insightful questions.

The question of the election has various dimensions. I wish to highlight, first of all, that this was not an election; it was a selection. There were four candidates hand-picked by the supreme leader. Mr. Mousavi, who should be commended in many respects, was a former prime minister. Mr. Karoubi, who also should be commended for being the first Iranian leader to stand up and admit that there had been systematic rape and torture in Iran's prisons, was the former speaker of the house. The structure is that the supreme leader will determine who can run for elections or run for Parliament, and that's the facade of democracy that the regime has created to legitimize itself without actually having a democracy.

The point is that after the recent violence, many of the reformists who believed that they could change the Islamic Republic from within have now realized that it may not be possible. At the same time, the supreme leader, who for many years was above these kinds of political divisions, has now become regarded as merely one political faction among others. The Office of the Supreme Leader has lost its legitimacy in an irreparable way. It's impossible for that institution to ever retrieve the authority that it once had.

There are, of course, struggles within the hard-liners as well, between Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad. This gentleman, Mr. Mashai, whom I explained was in Canada, was one of the points of contention. The supreme leader pressured President Ahmadinejad to remove him from one position. Ahmadinejad defied him by putting him in another equally important position.

There are all sorts of cracks within the regime, and a big part of it is also about plunder of resources, about who controls which part of the economy. You know that the government of the U.K. recently froze a bank account under legislation relating to the nuclear program, and according to many reports, this bank account contained \$1 billion in the name of Ayatollah Khamenei's son, Mojtaba. This is the link, once again, between resources and the power struggles that are happening within the country.

In the question on minorities, I imagine you're referring in particular to the recent terrorist bombing in Baluchistan. There is a real fear on the part of the non-violent democratic movement that as people in certain minorities become increasingly desperate, they will resort to violence. There were also two assassinations of government officials in the Kurdistan region of Iran.

My own sincere hope is that this democratic movement maintains its discipline and succeeds through non-violence, but one has to also anticipate the possibility that the longer this situation continues and the longer the international community helps to prop up this regime, the greater the prospect that some, discouraged by non-violence, will begin to resort to violent methods. That will be, I think, most unfortunate for the future of Iran and the kind of regime we will end up with.

• (1400)

The Chair: We have one more round of questions. In order to allow this to happen, I am going to see the clock as being at five minutes to two.

Go ahead, Mr. Hiebert, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you for being here. I have two questions.

You've said that the U.S. approach was detrimental to human rights in Iran, mostly because of the cuts to the funding of this group that monitors and writes about democracy in Iran. Is there anything else that the U.S. is doing or not doing that's also detrimental to human rights in Iran? That's question number one.

Question number two is that you said a moment ago that you or others have come to the conclusion that it's not possible to change the Iranian government from within. If you can't change it from within because the power is so concentrated with the supreme leader, then how will it ultimately change at all, if not by being completely overthrown through some sort of coup?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir.

On the question of U.S. policy, I'm not sure I understood completely. Once again, I'm not an expert on U.S. foreign policy. I think that on a bipartisan basis there clearly still is some sympathy on the human rights issue, but certain decisions have been made to take certain projects off the table. It really remains to be seen how U.S. policy unfolds.

Despite my expressions of regret over the funding decisions, I think once they come to the realization that any concession on the nuclear issue is only temporary and is not going to solve the fundamental problem, there can once again be more enlightened understanding of what role the west can play in supporting the democratic movement.

I think the advisers now in the Obama administration are those who, during the Bush administration, were against what they characterized as sort of cowboy diplomacy, making military threats, which only helped Ahmadinejad to unite the Iranian people against American imperialism and all this rhetoric of the revolution.

They now are moving in the opposite direction, but many of them are completely ignoring what happened over the summer. They have these views that Ahmadinejad is there to stay, we have to be realistic, we have to engage him, we shouldn't be making military threats. But they are completely disregarding this explosion that took place over the summer, which should fundamentally make them recalculate the equation in Iran and how much power Ahmadinejad really has.

In terms of change within, I want to be very careful with my words. The change within was the idea that through elections one could move forward with a reformist agenda. The question of changing the regime is not one, as I've repeatedly said, of replacing one group of tyrants with another group of tyrants. Of course, everyone speaks about human rights and democracy until they're in power; then they resort to the same methods.

The promise of Iran is that there is now a grassroots social movement calling for democracy. This is no longer just factional politics. The protestors, the millions in the streets, may have used the elections as a pretext to come out on the streets, but there are women's groups, human rights activists, student leaders, unemployed people, and just grandmothers and grandfathers and children who want freedom. They want hope.

That is the reason why I think a bright future lies ahead. Any leader who comes to power today must now answer to those people. We know that is ultimately the basis for a democracy rather than holding a few elections in a system where the people are disenfranchised and really have no real power or say.

Just underneath this very unfortunate image of Iran is a new, pragmatic, post-ideological, highly idealist, and highly capable generation of people who are truly human rights champions. So long as they maintain their discipline and keep their non-violent ethos, sooner or later these leaders will be put aside. Fortunately Iran is not like North Korea: it cannot be ruled through terror and intimidation indefinitely.

• (1405)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Akhavan.

It's been a pleasure having you here as a witness. We are very grateful that you were able to take the time to be here with us.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: We are adjourned....

No, we're not adjourned quite yet. I take that back.

Madam Thi Lac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Mr. Chair, I would like to make a suggestion for the committee.

We have received the report that we are to examine Tuesday next. However, we have heard new witnesses during the past weeks and it is still the same report that you had sent to us before we heard the new witnesses.

Instead of studying it next Tuesday, perhaps it would be more appropriate to let the researchers retrieve the information and put it in writing. Otherwise, it will have been useless to have welcomed new witnesses and heard them. I believe that it would be more appropriate to delay the study until the researchers have had the time to incorporate in their report the information that was provided by these witnesses. Moreover, as we have asked them to appear, it would be insulting for these people not to take any account of their testimony in our future report.

[English]

The Chair: Essentially it sounds as if you're suggesting that we don't have a meeting next Tuesday. Would that be a very brief summary of what you've just said?

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: We could have a meeting. I believe that we can meet next Tuesday precisely to deal with the schedule of future business, but not on the subject of the report.

I just want to give the researchers the time needed to put together the information provided by the witnesses that we have heard lately. Today we were all very happy to hear from the professor. Also, if we are to examine this on Tuesday, I can tell you that Mr. Akhavan will

have come here absolutely for nothing, because none of this information will be included in the report.

I do not want us to force the researchers to scramble. We must give them the time needed to put together the information provided by the latest witnesses, to work on another report that could be tabled perhaps a bit later. This could even be done when we come back after the break, so that we can make an in-depth study of the report.

I want the views expressed by witnesses to be incorporated in the report, otherwise it would have been useless to have them appear before us.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: I would like to make a brief intervention.

Has any of the testimony of our recent witnesses regarding the state of Iran after the uprising been aggregated into this report? If it hasn't, then I agree with what Madam Thi Lac said, to just leave it until our constituency week, because they're going to need time to take all that evidence and write it, and it's not going to happen in a couple of days.

The Chair: Is everyone cool with that?

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: All right. That's what we're going to do.

On Tuesday, we'll be talking about future business.

Thank you very much. Now we really are adjourned.

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