



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Human Rights in Iran”

The Brookings Institution 1775 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC

Thursday, October 28, 2010

The Brookings Institution held a panel discussion on Thursday titled “Human Rights in Iran.” The discussion was moderated by **Kenneth Pollack**, Senior Fellow and Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The panelists were **Geneive Abdo**, Director of the Iran Program at the Century Foundation, **Philo Dibble**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, **Markus Löning**, Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Aid at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, and **Mojtaba Vahedi**, political advisor to former Iranian presidential candidate **Mehdi Karroubi**.

Abdo was the first to speak, giving a brief description of a report from the Century Foundation and the Heinrich Böll Foundation titled “Placing Human Rights Violations in Iran on Top of the Foreign Policy Agenda: A New Imperative for U.S. and European Governments.” The topic of human rights abuses in Iran is spoken of frequently in Europe, but not in the U.S., Abdo stated. **The situation in Iran has deteriorated since the elections of 2009; the regime has gone from focusing on protestors and leaders of the opposition to going after civil society groups and university students.** Abdo described the persecution of students, saying that their records are being expunged and that they are being forcibly removed from campuses. **The Iranian people want Western governments to get involved and “take a clear stance” against the human rights abuses occurring under President Ahmadinejad.** Even the supporters of the regime find the abuses distasteful, Abdo argued, so the issue has good chance of turning public opinion in Iran against the government.

Vahedi spoke through a translator and began his statements by describing the Iranian government’s strategy toward human rights both before and after the elections in 2009. The government in Iran has always had human rights issues, Vahedi said, but they would normally just deny them or cover them up. **After June 2009, the government sought to use the abuse of human rights against the reformist movement. The reason, Vahedi explained, is that the government feared that the Green Movement would be successful in their attempts to delegitimize the government.** They had “nothing left to lose” after the widely reported killings of protestors, so the regime decided to use human rights abuses to pressure the reform movement to go underground. Vahedi gave several examples of actions taken by the Iranian government after the elections to utilize fear against the Green Movement. First, he described an infamous incident at Kahrizak prison, where 145 men were held in a room that was only 70 square meters. The authorities then introduced 25 hardened criminals to the room. Accusations of rape and assault soon followed. It has been sixteen months since these crimes, Vahedi said, and no one has been held accountable. **Saeed Mortazavi**, a close aide to Ahmadinejad, has been implicated in the case, but remains free, giving statements on state run television.

The incident at Kahrizak was publicized and used as an implicit threat: “Protest and go to Kahrizak.” The government also uses censorship to intimidate the population, according to Vahedi. Opposition groups and senior clerics who disagree with Ahmadinejad have their websites blocked. Even the chief prosecutor of Tehran had his statements removed from state run newspapers. **The**

strategy of the government has largely worked, Vahedi said. Street protests and visible resistance has fallen off to almost nothing, but the opposition to the regime is still there.

Löning focused on the international community's response to the situation in Iran saying that **"We (the international community) need to speak clearly about the situation and put pressure on the Iranians because it works."** **The Iranians do not enjoy having their transgressions made public, said Löning.** Germany has invited 50 Iranian human rights activists to live and work in Germany and more countries in the West should follow suit, according to Löning. The international community must tell the Iranians that "we expect them to comply with international law and their own constitution."

Dibble brought attention to the recently signed executive order placing sanctions on individuals in the Iranian government (including Saeed Mortazavi) for human rights abuses. **The Iran democracy program was funded at a level of \$40 million dollars this year. The program is hard to administer, due to the difficulty in finding Iranians in Iran who can participate. Internet freedom is a priority of the program and of the Secretary of State, according to Dibble.** Further details about the program were not forthcoming due to issues of security for those involved, but Dibble did say that software was being made available to people inside Iran that would facilitate communication within and without the country.

Kenneth Pollack began the question and answer session by asking why the regime is so sensitive to accusations of human rights abuses. Vahedi was the first to answer, and said that the regime is, in fact, not at all sensitive about it anymore. If they cared, he said, they would not have conducted themselves as they have for the last year and a half. **Abdo disagreed, saying that there is evidence that international pressure and criticism from some in the clerical community (which has called the regime's "Islamic credentials" into question) has affected the government.**

Another questioner asked how the panel could reconcile their support for sanctions with calls from the opposition, including from **Mir Hossein Mousavi**, to avoid punishing the people of Iran with sanctions. Vahedi answered that it is "well known" that the economic sanctions affect the Iranian people negatively, but those worried about sanctions should realize that the regime in power is worse in the long run, and that targeted, "smart" sanctions could change the situation.

The rest of the questions were asked as a group, two of them being does the Green Movement still exist, and what affect the "military option" has on the democracy movement in Iran.

Abdo responded to the Green Movement question by saying that contention still exists, but in a more diffuse "social movement" context with different sectors of society contending. **Vahedi said that "if one of the things happened in America out of the many that happened in Iran, Americans would stop protesting too." He added that if the Green Movement was dead, why would the government not allow the leaders to meet or hold rallies?**

With respect to the "military option," Vahedi said that, as an Iranian, he could not support an attack on his homeland, but that a leader saying the option is "on the table" is "natural" and not a serious threat. He pointed to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, saying that an attack against Iran would have similar costs, and that if intelligent pressure is applied to the regime, there will be no need for an attack.