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Iran's Human Rights Abuses

ALIREZA NADER

CT-369

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Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee,
Subcommittee on The Middle East and South Asia on September 22, 2011

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Iran's Human Rights Abuses²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on The Middle East and South Asia
United States House of Representatives**

September 22, 2011

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Ackerman, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Islamic Republic of Iran's human rights abuses. In addition, I would like to discuss the Iranian regime's behavior in light of the Arab Spring and the current state and future prospects of the opposition Green Movement. I will conclude with U.S. policy recommendations.

The Islamic Republic is one of the worst human rights abusers in the Middle East. The 2009 Iranian presidential election, widely perceived in Iran as fraudulent, led to a dramatic increase in Iranian state repression. Iranians who oppose the clerical-led regime are routinely harassed, jailed, tortured, raped, and executed. The leaders of the opposition Green Movement, including former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, have been placed under house arrest and isolated from their families and followers.

The Iranian regime has stepped up its use of force as it faces upcoming parliamentary (March 2012) and presidential elections (2013), which could become occasions for public demonstrations. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has admitted that elections remain a "challenge" for the Islamic Republic. The regime is also afflicted by deep internal divisions. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies are regularly accused of challenging Khamenei's authority, and the stability of the political system.

The Arab Spring has also heightened the Iranian regime's fears of similar revolts in Iran. The Islamic Republic has depicted the downfall of pro-American regimes in Tunisia and Egypt as a major setback to American power in the region. It has also claimed that Iran's own revolution

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served as the Arab Spring's source of inspiration. But the reality is quite different. Arab populations are increasingly critical of the Islamic Republic due to its poor treatment of Iranians and for the support it provides Bashar al-Assad's regime as it commits mass violence against the Syrian people.

More importantly, the Iranian regime remains vulnerable to the very same domestic forces that have led to the toppling of dictatorships across the Arab world. Although the regime may have been successful in silencing the Green Movement's leadership, it has not been able to crush Iranian aspirations for a freer and more democratic form of government.

Like many of their Arab neighbors, Iranians face the daily frustration and indignity bred by an increasingly repressive system. One does not have to be a member of the Green Movement to feel the regime's oppressive power. Women in Iran are denied equal rights despite their educational, economic, and civic accomplishments. Iranian youth languish in frustration, bereft of the opportunities and freedoms afforded to their peers across the world. Ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities live in constant fear.

Recent revelation of massive corruption in Iran, including banking embezzlements by individuals closely tied to the regime, shows that the Islamic Republic has deviated from its self-described mission of erasing the social inequality that existed under the monarchy. Iran today is a nation of the haves and have-nots. Those with close connections to the government live in luxury while the rest of Iranians endure climbing inflation and increasing unemployment.

Conditions in Iran suggest that a Persian "Spring" is quite possible. But Iranians have not, so far, followed the footprints of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries. The 2009 presidential election and the birth of the Green Movement saw the most serious challenge to the Islamic Republic since its creation in 1979. Yet the massive protests in 2009 and the demands of the Green Movement have not led to any positive political or economic changes in Iran.

The Green Movement today is divided and leaderless. Mousavi, along with prominent Green Movement leader Mehdi Karrubi, have little contact with the outside world. They have asked Iranians to boycott the 2012 parliamentary election, while another prominent Green Movement leader, former President Mohammad Khatami, has called for reconciliation with the regime.

But the Green Movement faces an even more fundamental weakness. It seeks to preserve the very same Islamic Republic that oppresses it. The Green Movement's leadership has stated its adherence to and belief in the Iranian constitution, which does entail democratic principles. But

the constitution also empowers unelected and unaccountable governing bodies that prevent free and fair elections.

Finally, the Green Movement does not appear to have an ultimate objective. It wishes to pursue reforms, yet the regime has banned it from participating in the political system. It has encouraged protests, but it has not called for changes that can truly transform Iran's repressive political system, including a drastically altered or even new constitution.

Regardless, the Green Movement's inherent weaknesses have not given way to the total suppression of the democracy movement in Iran. Iranians have increasingly engaged in acts of civil disobedience independently of the Green Movement and its leadership.

Thousands of Azeri Iranians have protested against regime policies that have led to the erosion of Lake Orumieh in northwestern Iran, one of the largest saltwater lakes in the world. The lake, which is in danger of disappearing in the next several years, is a symbol of Azeri history, culture, and pride. Furthermore, Iranian youth have used social media to organize water fights--using plastic guns and balloons-- in Tehran's parks. These water fights not only relieve the frustration and ennui felt by Iranian youth, but also represent the growing civil disobedience against an abusive state. As expected, the water fights have been violently disrupted by the Iranian regime.

The regime, however, is not totally dependent on force and violence. It does maintain support among a sizeable portion of the Iranian population, many of whom view the Islamic Republic as a force of "resistance" against what they perceive to be U.S. "imperialism" in the Middle East. Iranians are a nationalistic people, and many of them are resentful of past U.S. interference in Iran, including the 1953 U.S. sponsored coup against Iran's democratically elected government and subsequent U.S. support for the Iranian monarchy.

The regime has exploited Iranian nationalism to buttress its own legitimacy and authority. In particular, it has depicted the Green Movement, in addition to other civil rights actors, as "pawns" of Western powers. The Islamic Republic has also portrayed U.S. and international policies on the Iranian nuclear program as part of an effort to deny Iran both advanced technology and its perceived place among the world's great nations.

Thus, U.S. opposition to the Iranian nuclear program, while necessary given the threats posed by a potential Iranian nuclear weapons capability, has also had the effect of strengthening the regime among its core supporters.

The intense U.S. focus on the nuclear program may have also convinced many Iranians that the United States was solely concerned with its security interest in the Middle East, rather than with the plight of ordinary Iranians. Unfortunately, past U.S. efforts to engage the Iranian regime have met with little success. The Iranian regime continues to make steady progress on the nuclear program while undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East. Moreover, U.S. efforts to engage the Islamic Republic have also diminished efforts in strongly condemning the regime's human rights abuses. This is not to suggest that the United States should abandon all efforts of diplomatic engagement; Iran's isolation serves the regime's interests by cutting Iranians off from the outside world. Rather, the United States should be more balanced in pursuing its objectives regarding Iran.

Recently, the United States has begun a shift in this direction, putting a greater emphasis on the Iranian regime's human rights abuses which can thereby counter negative Iranian perceptions of U.S. policies and intentions. For instance, the U.S. government has supported the establishment of a special UN human rights monitor for Iran. In addition, the United States has sanctioned high-ranking Iranian security officials for their involvement in human rights abuses.

However, additional steps should be taken.

U.S. officials should denounce the regime's abuses more vigorously, and more often. Stronger condemnations from senior U.S. officials, including President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, will be viewed by Iranian democracy activists as signs of encouragement. In tandem, the United States should designate additional members of the Iranian security services, especially top-ranking AND mid-ranking members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Basij paramilitary forces.

U.S. criticism of Iran's human rights abuses will also carry more credibility if the United States is similarly outspoken regarding the failings of other Middle Eastern regimes, including those which enjoy some degree of U.S. support.

The United States should also strongly question the legitimacy of Iran's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, especially considering the political suppression and human rights violations carried out by the regime. The 2009 presidential election, which remains in dispute, effectively taints the results of future elections. The Islamic Republic has historically depicted elections in Iran as a sign that it is a "democracy", and is therefore particularly vulnerable to internal and external accusations of illegitimacy.

But direct U.S. intervention in Iranian affairs, including support for Iranian opposition groups within Iran and abroad, will only be depicted by the Islamic Republic as a plot to undermine Iran's independence. The Iranian population, much like the Tunisians and Egyptians, is capable of challenging its government on its own. It does not need direct material or financial aid, of an overt or covert nature.

The Iranian regime faces great challenges. It has lost much legitimacy since the 2009 election and is internally divided. Moreover, it is increasingly unable to meet the political and economic aspirations of its own people. Its survival as a cohesive and functioning regime is hardly guaranteed. The United States may not be able to dissuade the Islamic Republic from continuing its nuclear program through engagement and sanctions, but it can demonstrate that it is on the side of Iranian democrats who may rule Iran one day.

Again, I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to taking your questions.