



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Ms. Goli Ameri

US Public Delegate to the UN Human Rights Commission -

Thanks very much to the commission for inviting me here today. I am deeply honored to be with you. I would like to extend special greetings to Senator Gordon Smith, my home state senator from Oregon, a long time friend and mentor. Let me also thank the members of the Iranian-American community who have taken the time to be present here today.

Let me start out by setting the record straight regarding my presence at this hearing. I am not a scholar nor an academic. I have not dedicated my life to studying democratic movements and I am not an expert on the Iranian civic society. We have experts here today that can speak more eloquently on the subject of Democracy and Human Rights in Iran. I wish Dr. Abbas Milani and Professor Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institute Iran Democracy Project were also here today to share their experiences with you.

I am honored to have the opportunity today to share with you some of my experiences at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva as well as the feedback I received from the Iranian-American community all over the country during my congressional campaign last year.

I believe, the unique insight that I might bring to this hearing, is an intimate and first hand knowledge of the power and force of freedom and democracy. Because these two words to immigrants like myself are not abstract academic or political words. Freedom and democracy are words that have had a direct impact on my life and on the lives of hundreds of thousands of other Iranian-Americans in the last thirty years.

Many Iranian-Americans who are citizens of the United States today lost their homes, their businesses and everything they'd worked hard for after the 1979 revolution. We witnessed our parents displaced and futures put in doubt. Many with only the clothes on their backs and with the accumulation of a first-class education gained right here in the United States started their lives in this great country. America believed in our future and our potential and it brought out the best in us. We felt right at home here putting our values of hard work, honesty, and perseverance to work.

Iranian-Americans know that everything they have accomplished, careers and successes they owe to America and the freedom and democracy we have experienced here. To quote Governor Schwarzenegger: "It's a privilege to be born here. It's an honor to become a citizen here. It's a gift to raise your family here."

Who are the Iranian Americans?

Iranian Americans are a product of the American dream and they have seized this dream with a vengeance. They have excelled in law, medicine, business, education, art, the media and sports. They serve in our military, law enforcement and the government. They are the founders, co-founders and senior executives of Fortune 500 and Inc. 500 companies. They are university presidents. They are the Director of the Mars Program at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratories, they are the Deputy National Security Advisor and Deputy Undersecretary of Education, and they are nationally recognized reporters and news anchors.

The Iranian-American community feels fortunate to have had the freedom to pursue our interests, to select our vocations, and to direct our destinies. They are grateful that they've been able to practice their religion whether Muslim, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian faiths. Iranian Americans have taken it upon themselves to return the faith that America has placed in us by giving back to our communities and keeping our democracy vibrant. An Iranian-American woman entrepreneur recently made a multi-million investment in the future of public space travel. Iranian-Americans are supporting a variety of schools and research programs at those exact same universities that gave them an initial start in life in this country.

I have had the privilege to meet thousands of Iranian-Americans around the country during my congressional campaign last year. The mainstream Iranian-American community has not always been vocal on the topic of Iran. Some have felt that the US congress has not reached out enough to the community. So please know that the community is grateful for this hearing and this invitation.

But there are also other reasons why the community has not been vocal on US policy towards Iran. After losing everything, most were consumed by rebuilding their lives, raising their families, building careers and creating jobs. They had little time left for political involvement.

Many living in the United States have family back in Iran. There is a fear about speaking up, fear about the negative impact on relatives or being stopped at the airport and thrown into jail upon entry into the country.

And then there's been the grappling with the public image. How to separate the Iranian government from the Iranian-American community. You heard I took a precious one minute in this testimony to tell you about who the Iranian-Americans really are. To show you that they are model citizens of this country; dedicated to upholding the constitution and the institutions of this great land

Iranian-Americans love their heritage and the motherland, and they abhor terrorism and extremism. The community cringed at the hostage crisis, cringes at and condemns every act of terrorism. I don't know of a single Iranian-American who did not shed tears in agony and rage after the tragedy of 9/11. Then there are more complex issues at play. Family members of Iranian-Americans, elderly parents, even those on their deathbeds, are denied visas because Iran is recognized a terrorist nation. How do you separate the people from the government? How do you articulate the difference and the genuine suffering of families to lawmakers at a

time when the fight against terrorism is an important national priority? It's a complex subject so often times the Iranian-American community chooses to be silent or has yet to find a champion to open the issue for public debate.

Attitude of Iranian-Americans

But please don't think for a moment that because mainstream Iranian-Americans are not vocal, they don't care about what happens to their motherland and to their compatriots in Iran. In fact Iranian-Americans feel a great sense of responsibility to the Iranian people as well as an obligation to the interests of the United States, a land which they love and are sworn to protect.

In my encounters with thousands of Iranian-Americans in the past two years, an overwhelming majority want for the people of Iran to enjoy the same basic freedoms we have enjoyed in this country: freedom of press, speech, religion, separation of church and state, the rights of women, right to property, etc. They want for Iran to be respected and recognized as an example of freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, and economic prosperity in the Middle East and as a trusted partner in the world community.

They also care deeply about Iran's sovereignty and the preservation of its borders and are profoundly concerned about a military conflict between the United States and Iran. Ultimately they believe that a free, democratic and prosperous Iran cannot be a nuclear or any other form of threat to the US or any other nation.

In my experience, there are three different views on US policy towards Iran amongst Iranian-Americans. One group believes that the US needs to take an active role and make regime change an official US policy. The second group believes that freedom from decades of oppression can only come from the Iranian people themselves without any type of outside involvement.

In my travels, the majority of Iranian Americans I met, have a third more considered way in mind. They speak as concerned CITIZENS of the United States and independent of political opposition groups or extremist political doctrines. They care about US's long term interest as much as they care for their compatriots in Iran. Because of these two factors, this group of Iranian-Americans instinctively understands the requirements and the process for democratization in a country like Iran. They believe in the people of Iran and want them empowered to take their destiny in their own hands.

Iranian Americans support the promotion of a civil society in Iran. However, they want to ascertain that the format of support does not hurt the long-term security and interests of the United States as well as not sully the mind-set of the Iranian people towards the United States.

Because of the country's strategic and geographic position, for centuries Iranians have been weary of what is commonly known as "foreign influences". In my father and grandfather's time, everything that happened in Iran, the good, the bad and the ugly, was because of the British. The Russians and the French had their own designs, and the overthrow of Prime

Minister Mossadegh by the CIA in the 1950s dragged the United States into the fray as well.

Transatlantic Alliance

This is where the transatlantic alliance becomes so important. To quote the upcoming Freedom House report which has studied 70 countries where authoritarian systems have collapsed: "The U.S. and other countries need to increase their focus on and support for nonviolent means of civic resistance, led by broad based coalitions that unite mature and skilled civic organizations and a citizenry that has been awakened to the misrule of their [leaders]." I must emphasize that Iranian-Americans differentiate between support for opposition groups and support for civic organizations, with the former being of zero interest. Broad-based civic support is already happening in the Netherlands through the efforts of the Iranian-Dutch parliamentarian, Ms. Farah Karimi. She passed a bill in the Dutch parliament which appropriates 30 million Euros to a credible and professionally-managed Persian language satellite broadcasting station for defending human rights in Iran. A web site, iran-emrooz.de has also been established and it publishes articles and editorials from Iran's internal civil society as well as experts outside of Iran on such topics as children's rights, prisoner rights, and a review of internal weblogs.

It is extremely important for the United States and Europe to cooperate closely on supporting a civic society so that one 1. Members of the civic society in Iran will not be punished for accepting help from the United States, and 2. Fingers will not be pointed at the United States for meddling in the internal affairs of Iran. You will hear this from any Iranian-American who has visited Iran in the past decade. There is no populace in the Middle East that is more pro-American than Iranians. The Iranian-American community wants to ascertain that these feelings are long-lasting.

As you already know, I recently had the honor and the privilege to have been a US public delegate to the human rights commission in Geneva. I witnessed first hand the fruits of close cooperation between the EU and the US. We passed the resolution tabled by the EU condemning Belarus' human rights record together. We cooperated on the resolution regarding Sudan and the genocide in Darfur. The EU helped us in defeating Cuba's retaliatory resolution on the situation in Guantanamo. None of this came easily, but it shows we can work together. As an immigrant to this great land, I'd like to say to the Europeans that America is not attempting to craft the world or Iran in its own political and economic image. For freedom and democracy are not American values. They are universal values. They are values that were born and nurtured in France right on the heels of the end of the war of American independence. The French Revolution was a powerful force behind ideas and movements of liberal democracy and popular sovereignty. As Secretary Rice said in her recent speech to the Community of Democracies, "The real division in our world is between those states that are committed to freedom and those who are not."

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, Once again on behalf of the Iranian-American community present, I thank you for this invitation.