



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Welcome to this Helsinki Commission hearing on human rights in Iran, the first in a series of hearings we will hold on rogue regimes and implications for the OSCE region. Indeed, Iran directly borders several OSCE participating States and events in that large country have a bearing on the broader Middle East and beyond. While many are rightly focused on the security threats posed by Iran, our focus today will be on the deteriorating human rights climate under Tehran's tyrannical regime.

I am particularly mindful of the hardship faced by individuals living under authoritarian regimes or dictatorships. Across the board, Iran's human rights record is dismal. The Iranian regime employs all of the levers of power to crush dissent, resorting in every form of persecution -- even so far as execution. No effort is spared to silence opposition.

Virtually every fundamental freedom is trampled by the tyrants in Tehran. In the absence of any meaningful accountability, the Government of Iran's dismal rights record has actually worsened, according to the State Department's latest Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Severe restrictions are placed on freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion. With respect to religion, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has concluded that, "the government of Iran engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused." Accordingly, the State Department has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern," each year since 1999 under the International Religious Freedom Act.

The country's security and intelligence services are pervasive, while the apparatus of political control has increasingly sought to remove any remnant of reform. As a result, a small circle of clerics -- headed by the Supreme Leader -- maintains a virtual monopoly of power in Iran. In the face of this formidable regime, courageous individuals and groups do seek change, often at great personal risk. I recall the students gunned down during the course of the demonstrations of July 1999. Hopes that even modest political changes could be won by so-called "moderates" have proven illusory. Against this backdrop, I will be interested in the views of the witnesses on the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for June 17th.

Freedom denied sums up the regime's approach to fundamental human rights across the board. And the tyrants in Tehran time after time have shown a zeal for crushing outbreaks of free thought. Having come down hard on vestiges of independent media, the regime has pursued

those who sought refuge on the internet as a domain for democratic discussion.

I strongly believe that the people of Iran want change. We have a young and vibrant base that, with the support of the US and Europe, could promote major change in Iran and in the region. We were able to secure a small amount of funding last year for dissidents inside and outside of Iran for the purpose of promoting democracy and human rights. We must do more to support the Iranian people and I believe that a concerted approach by the US and Europe could be effective and sustainable.

As news reports have indicated, the US and the Europeans have worked together in recent months on the growing threat of Iran's nuclear ambitions. France, Great Britain and Germany have urged Tehran to abandon their development of nuclear technologies in return for backing Iran's bid to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO). As a result, the US has expressed optimism at Europe's promise to refer Iran to UN Security Council should they fail to comply with the agreement.

As Chairman, I would also point out that there is considerable cooperation between the United States and our European allies when it comes to human rights in Iran, at least on paper. Over the years, there have been numerous jointly sponsored U.S. – EU resolutions on the subject at the UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva. This year there was not. Recently the Bush Administration initiated a human rights working group to discuss these issues with our European allies. I would appreciate the analysis of today's witnesses on the real state of play in efforts to partner with Europeans to address – in word and in deed – the egregious human rights situation in Iran.

I would like to welcome all of our witnesses and the many Iranian Americans who have joined us here today. Welcome.