

Americans can't abandon people of Iran

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EVIN 209, the most horrifying political prison in Tehran, is now home to labor activists who demand a free union, women's rights activists who seek an end to gender apartheid and students who oppose political dictatorship. Last week a few more known faces of Iran's democracy movement were transferred there.

This is all part of the undeclared war of the Iranian government against its citizens. Over the years, I have listened to many horrific tales told by friends and relatives of these prisoners.

I have witnessed the optimism of the American press about the emergence of moderates, the so-called elections and the misunderstood mullahs.

I have watched wealthy donors concerned with peace and reconciliation between the United States and Iran set up lobbying groups in Washington to urge Americans to stay out of Iran's internal affairs. Translation: Ignore arbitrary arrest, torture and execution of civil society activists. Unless, of course, the prisoner happens to be an Iranian-American.

The U.S. and international community have focused on Iran's nuclear program and its regional threat to peace and security. There is now a consensus among foreign policy elites to reach a diplomatic solution with Tehran and to negotiate without preconditions. But, the Iranian regime already has established its conditions for negotiations: The rest of the world must not interfere with Iran's internal problems. Translation: We run a dictatorship and will do what we want to our people. It is none of your business. It is not as though you haven't befriended dictators before.

They have a point. In my college days, when progressive friends and I protested regimes in South Africa and Chile, when we demanded an end to the bombing of El Salvador and the covert and illegal war in Nicaragua, we used to say: Washington never met a dictator it didn't like.

This was not just about Nixon going to China. It was, as Noam Chomsky said, the Washington connection to Third World fascism that we despised. So, I am not surprised to see that the U.S. foreign policy elite are warming up to the regime in Tehran. I am only surprised at the silence of the progressive and democratic-minded intellectuals and activists who were once the conscience of this country.

What if the foreign policy elites have gotten it wrong again? They will normalize

relations on Iran's terms and remain silent on human rights violations, censorship, sham elections and the arbitrary arrest, torture and execution of dissidents. The prisoners of Section 209 will be left to their tormentors.

Perhaps, one day there will be another prison massacre like the one that took place in 1988 in the same prison and in other cities that claimed the lives of several thousand political prisoners.

The American press will go on ignoring the crimes committed against Iranian people and the moneyed class will hire the best lobbyists in Washington to erase those crimes from the pages of history.

It is a pragmatic approach, and perhaps the regime will see the light and return the favor by decreasing its interference in Iraq and Afghanistan and delaying nuclear deployment. Would that bring peace and stability to the region? Will a regime that is at war with its own citizens live in peace with its neighbors?

What if the key to peace and stability in the Middle East is a democratic Iran? What if the key to peace is bringing down the walls of the notorious Evin 209? A democratic Iran would send shock waves of democratization throughout the entire region. The nuclear threat to Israel and other neighbors quickly would evaporate.

The foreign policy elites may have different priorities. History tells us that, in the long run, they create more problems than they solve. Their cure for the Russian invasion of Afghanistan became a Taliban regional epidemic. Their solution to the Saddam Hussein nightmare was an inferno of war and destruction. The Middle East is not a shining star on their resume.

The voices of intellectuals and dissidents in this country must call for a different objective. Ordinary Americans cannot abandon Iran's people and their struggle for democracy and human rights. If we turn our back on them, we will have lost again the opportunity for a democratic transformation of the region.

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