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“Thinking of Home And of Human Rights”

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He has prosecuted war criminals from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, advised the United Nations on criminal law in Cambodia, Guatemala and East Timor, and joined a legal brief challenging the indefinite detention of an American citizen at Guantánamo Bay.

But throughout his career as a human rights lawyer, Payam Akhavan had never turned his focus to the place that inspired him to work for human rights: Iran, the nation his family fled when he was 9 years old.

"I sometimes feel perhaps I went seeking justice around the world rather than my own country because it is much easier," said Mr. Akhavan, a former legal adviser to the prosecutor's office of the international criminal tribunals at The Hague.

Last month, nearly 30 years after his family left Iran, Mr. Akhavan changed that, turning his human rights experience toward his homeland. Along with two other Iranian immigrants, Ramin Ahmadi, a doctor, and Roya Hakakian, a journalist, Mr. Akhavan opened the Iranian Human Rights Documentation Center, an organization in New Haven aimed at compiling an authoritative account of human rights violations in Iran since 1979.

Financed through a two-year, \$1 million grant from the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund, the center will also attempt to document current abuses in Iran. The goal, the organizers said, was to enable Iranians to come to terms with human rights violations over the last 25 years by acknowledging the abuses and holding those responsible accountable -- necessary steps for progress toward democracy.

For the three founders of the center, it will also reflect a coming to terms with their own pasts.

Like Mr. Akhavan, Dr. Ahmadi built his career around concerns for human rights. A professor of internal medicine and epidemiology at Yale, Mr. Ahmadi founded the Center for Health and Human Rights at Griffin Hospital in Derby, which trains medical students and residents in community and public health ways to address human rights issues. At the moment, he is assisting tsunami

victims in Sri Lanka with a team of doctors from the area.

Dr. Ahmadi has investigated the toll war crimes took on survivors in Chechnya and East Timor, but, like Mr. Akhavan, he had never found a way to focus on Iran, which he left as an 18-year-old refugee in 1982.

"We have used our expertise everywhere except in the case of Iran," Dr. Ahmadi said.

By focusing on holding individuals accountable for human rights violations, the organizers said they believed they could make inroads.

Owen Fiss, a Yale Law professor who serves on the center's board, said the plan was to rely on the accounts of Iranians living outside Iran, many of whom have carried documents and memories of human rights abuses in Iran for years. The organizers also want to develop an online method for people in Iran to report human rights violations.

Mr. Akhavan said the next step would likely be to identify people who can be held responsible, and eventually be brought to trial if the political situation in Iran changes. Since the center has opened, he said organizers have begun to establish ties with nongovernmental human rights organizations and activists with access to documents about abuses in Iran. They have also identified witnesses who could testify about torture and other experiences, he said.

"Ultimately, the goal is to use this information in order to encourage accountability in order to move away from a culture of impunity," he said. "Dealing with past human rights abuses is as much about settling accounts from the past as it is paving the way for the future, and if people have committed widespread human rights abuses if these crimes go unanswered, there is a sort of latent aggression which will continue to haunt the political culture in many generations to come."

The past they hope to overcome includes years of disappearances, executions based on trials without due process and torture in prisons. Dissidents often languished in prison on false charges, according to a 2003 State Department report, and, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, some political prisoners have been tortured and executed.

Ms. Hakakian chronicled this period in her book, "Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran," which traced her own coming of age against the events that formed the current regime: the fall of the Shah in 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power amid widespread celebration and support among Iranians, and the collapse a short time later of the transitional government, replaced by a harshly repressive regime.

Though Ms. Hakakian and her friends initially welcomed the 1979 revolution as an escape from the secret police force and restrictions of the Shah's regime, they soon found their lives even more restricted. The older sister of a friend was jailed and tortured for supporting a banned opposition group. A teacher told Ms. Hakakian that she would be imprisoned for a composition she wrote criticizing war. She left Iran for the United States in 1985, at age 18, claiming political asylum. Ms. Hakakian completed college here and earned a graduate degree before spending five years as a television producer. In the United States, she rarely spoke of her experiences back home. "When you have been a refugee, abandoned all your loves and belongings, your memories become your belongings," she wrote in her book.

It was only after living more than a decade in the United States, and with some coaxing from friends, that Ms. Hakakian began to write about her time in Iran. Afterward, she worried that many other Iranians had not recorded their stories, leaving most narratives on the revolution and Iran's last quarter century to accounts from the Iranian government or the writings of non-Iranians.

"I'm living in a time when everything I learn and read about Iran is someone else's account," she said. "To say that it's frustrating is an understatement."

Ms. Hakakian described the center as a way to establish a new history of post-revolutionary Iran, an attempt to show images of Iranians besides those she often sees in news stories, of "fist-waving zealots." Without hearing from Iranians themselves, she said, Americans will likely view Iranian culture with fear.

The organizers say they have taken care to emphasize the nonpolitical nature of the center.

"We are not against the government of Iran," Mr. Akhavan said. "We simply want to hold the government accountable to international human rights standards."

Mr. Akhavan, who serves a senior fellow at Yale's Orville H. Schell Jr. Center for International Human Rights, said he feared repercussions if the center was perceived as political or interested in a particular outcome apart from protecting human rights.

"There is a certain intimacy and engagement which makes it much more difficult, much more agonizing, but at the same time, much more compelling," Mr. Akhavan said.