

Haleh Esfandiari: Iran's cultural prison

By Rasool Nafisi,
Created 2007-05-16 23:00

The detention of [Haleh Esfandiari](#) [1], a senior Iranian scholar based in the United States who had returned to Iran to visit her elderly mother and to touch the roots of her beloved country, has refocused the attention of political analysts on the Islamic Republic of Iran's motives. In seeking an explanation for the new wave of arrests - of which Esfandiari's is only one [2]- some western observers have repeated the threadbare argument that American policy toward Iran is itself the culprit.

This line of thinking identifies the \$75 million programme request [3] from the US state department to promote democracy in Iran, unveiled in February 2006, as the trigger for Tehran's crackdown on various groups of activists and intellectuals. The problem with such an analysis is twofold: first, it focuses principally on Washington (without being necessarily convincing even about that) rather than on Tehran's own agency; second, it assumes that the Iranian government needs threats of regime change from the Bush administration to perpetrate such violations.

Rasool Nafisi teaches the sociology of development at Strayer University in Virginia. He contributes to various news agencies, including the Voice of America, BBC, and *Radio France International*. His website is [here](#) [4]

Also by Rasool Nafisi in openDemocracy:

"The meaning of Ramin Jahanbegloo's arrest [4]" (16 May 2006)

"Ramin Jahanbegloo: a repressive release [4]"
(1 September 2006)

A stronger argument contends that Iran's security forces are (as with the arrest [4] of the fifteen British naval personnel in March 2007) indulging in their familiar tit-for-tat tactics; in this case, attempting to gain leverage over the seizure of their own agents - or diplomats - by American forces in Iraq. The arrest of Haleh Esfandiari, in this view, might be considered part of an effort to produce bargaining-chips for an exchange.

A further and more pleading case is offered by those seeking to warn [5] the Iranian government that its behaviour may damage its national interests and image (especially in the US), and by extension help intransigent elements within or close to [6] the Bush administration. If anything, they argue, Esfandiari is a steadfast advocate of dialogue with Iran and of ending hostilities between the two countries. Why should Iran alienate effective Iranian-Americans like Esfandiari, and reinforce the opportunity for hardliners to do Iran ill?

The trouble with these two approaches is, again, that they see Iranian foreign policy as the key variable, and pay little attention to political dynamics within the country. In such assessments of

Haleh Esfandiari's arrest is the assumption that Mahmoud Ahmadineja [7]d and his supporters are ignorant of the likely outcomes of their actions. This is wrong: they are well aware of those outcomes, and indifferent to them.

But to argue that Ahmadinejad and his ilk may welcome a crisis over such provocations is not wrong. The Iranian president has been creating crises - local and international - on a routine basis since he was elected to office in June 2005 [7]. Haleh Esfandiari, in the regime's twisted logic, may have seemed an appropriate target for its punishment: in her capacity as director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars [8], she had offered fellowships to young scholars from Iran (who are naturally inclined toward reform and democracy). This may have been enough for Tehran's hardliners to have plotted Esfandiari's arrest, enabling them to accuse her (bizarrely) of espionage [9]and undermine their rivals in Iran by associating the latter with her.

Among openDemocracy's recent articles on Iranian politics [9] in a period of crisis:

Hooshang Amirahmadi, "Iran and the international community: roots of perpetual crisis [9]" (24 November 2006)

Dariush Zahedi & Omid Memarian, "Ahmadinejad, Iran and America [9]" (15 January 2007)

Ali Afshari & H Graham Underwood, "Iran's post-election balance [9]" (22 January 2007)

Kamin Mohammadi, "Voices from Tehran [9]" (31 January 2007)

Fred Halliday, "The matter with Iran [9]" (1 March 2007)

Anoush Ehteshami, "Iran and the United states: back from the brink [9]" (16 March 2007)

Sanam Vakil, "Iran's hostage politics [9]" (2 April 2007)

Andreas Malm & Shora Esmailian, "Iran: the hidden power [9]" (10 April 2007)

Nazenin Ansari, "Tehran's political dynamic: after the kidnap crisis [9]" (16 April 2007)

Nasrin Alavi, "Axis of Evil vs Great Satan: wrestling to normality [9]" (2 May 2007)

Omid Memarian, "Iran and the United states: time to engage [9]" (2 May 2007)

The context of repression

Ahmadinejad's readiness to provoke crisis, and the tendency toward greater repression, has been evident for some time. The appointment of two ministers [10](Mostafa Pourmohammadi at interior and Gholam-Hosseini Mohseni-Ejeie at information) was a warning that a xenophobic old guard trapped in a paranoid view of the world was back with a vengeance. In the late 1990s, a gang of thugs inside the information ministry was responsible for a series of gruesome killings

(euphemistically called "chain murders") of leading intellectuals and political activists such as Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar [11]; many Iranian observers now worry that they have returned to the helm.

Ahmadinejad may not have complete power within Iran's complex power-structure [12], but he can rely on considerable support: from a coalition of some factions of the Revolutionary Guards, the *basij* (the militia controlled by the guards), groups of urban lower-class fanatics represented by the *maddahs* (religious cantors), and the ever-present *Ansar-e-Hezbollah* (the vigilantes of the Islamic Republic in charge of suppressing political dissent and bludgeoning demonstrations). For this range of forces, the principal enemy of their type of Islamic state is urban Iranian culture with its diverse and (to these people) threatening social freedoms.

Ahmadinejad's security forces, since they rose to power in his train, have tried methodically to stifle cultural exchange and suppress political-intellectual discourse. A major dilemma for these hardcore Islamists is the free movement of members of the Iranian diaspora [13]- often highly educated, independent-minded and trained in critical thought - whose members bring into the country fresh ideas and alternative viewpoints [14].

The result has been a new wave of censorship in Iran that has even led to bans on the republication of works by renowned writers such as the pathbreaking poetess Forough Farrokhzad [15], and the Indian guru Krishnamurti. The arrest of Haleh Esfandiari can be understood in this light. It is a powerful warning to all - including Iranians abroad, from nostalgic young second-generation residents of western countries, to their parents' generation (perhaps with property in the country) and diaspora scholars - that travelling back and forth between Iran and the world is a dangerous activity.

This attitude reveals both the weakness and the strength of the regime mindset. In it there is a desperate effort to stop time, revert to the pre-reformist era, and demonstrate to Iranians that (as a popular Farsi saying has it) "the door is still turning around the same old hinge". At the same time, its raw brutality exposes the forgetfulness of many analysts that dark forces continued to exist under the Islamic republic's rubric.

During the reform era of Mohammad Khatami [16] (1989-97), efforts to create a new direction and image for the state established a sense that Iran was moving beyond the repression of the post-revolution years. An unfortunate by-product was that the arrogance and excess of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took many observers by surprise. But the latter is more an authentic representative of this state than his predecessor, more of a rule than an exception. Khatami's policies and approach can be contested, but one thing is increasingly clear: his reformist presidency was the best form of governance that the Islamic Republic of Iran can offer. Haleh Esfandiari's travail [17] reveals the oppressive and fanatical tendencies inside the state. There may be even worse to come.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/haleh_mind_4625.jsp

Links:

[1] [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1426&fuseaction=topics.profile&person_id=8940)

[index.cfm?topic_id=1426&fuseaction=topics.profile&person_id=8940](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1426&fuseaction=topics.profile&person_id=8940)

[2] <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/05/09/africa/ME-GEN-Iran-US-Missing-Woman.php>

[3] <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/61268.htm>

[4] <http://www.rnafisi.com/>

[5] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/10/AR2007051002254.html>

[6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/05/16/wbolton16.xml>

- [7] <http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/bio/>
[8] http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.item&news_id=236704
[9] <http://www.iranian.com/BTW/2007/May/Esfandiari/index.html>
[10] <http://hrw.org/backgrounders/mena/iran1205/4.htm>
[11] <http://www.pen.org/freedom/parvaneh.htm>
[12] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/03/iran_power/html/default.stm
[13] <http://migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=424>
[14] <http://www.iranian.com/BTW/2007/May/Esfandiari/index.html>
[15] <http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/index1.htm>
[16] http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mkhatami/mohammad_khatami.php
[17] <http://freehaleh.org/>



This article is published by Rasool Nafisi, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.