

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

June 22, 2015

At Home With Our Iranian Nuclear Partners

By Jared Genser and Sara Birkenthal

Tehran has put to death more than 1,500 people since 2013. Its political prisoners exceed 900.

The world recently has played down criticism of Iran on human rights in hopes of securing an elusive nuclear deal, which may or may not actually affect its nuclear ambitions. Meanwhile, the Iranian regime has doubled down its repression of domestic dissent.

More than 1,500 executions have been carried out in Iran since Hasan Rouhani became president in August 2013. With 721 individuals executed in 2014 alone, Iran boasts the world's highest per capita execution rate and is on pace to break its own record for executions in one year. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, the Iranian regime could top 1,000 executions by the end of 2015.

All this under Mr. Rouhani, Iran's "moderate" president.

While the international community wanted to believe that Mr. Rouhani's election would herald a sea change inside Iran, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei remains the real power. And it is persecution as usual in the Islamic Republic.

Among the persecuted: Abdolfattah Soltani, a human-rights lawyer and Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, was arrested in 2011 and is currently serving 13 years for a variety of charges including "spreading propaganda against national security," accepting an "unlawful" award (the 2009 Nuremberg International Human Rights Award), and "assembly and collusion against national security." He is banned from practicing law for an additional 20 years and has been denied

medical care.

Mr. Soltani is joined in Evin Prison—Iran’s notorious jail for political prisoners where rape, floggings and torture are routine—by Maryam Shafipour, a 29-year-old student of agricultural engineering and human-rights activist sentenced to seven years in 2014 for “spreading propaganda” and “gathering and colluding” against the regime. In reality, she is in jail for having visited family members of political prisoners and advocating for the rights of students barred from higher education for their political activities, including herself.

Mr. Soltani and Ms. Shafipour are among at least 900 political prisoners in Iran’s jails, according to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Many have been denied due process and sentenced after closed trials, or no trials at all. Then there is the regime’s relentless persecution of religious minorities, women and a broad range of other real and imagined enemies.

Ahmed Shaheed, U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, recently cited the prosecution of a broad range of dissenters on the basis of “vague references to threats to national security, propaganda against the system and insult to authorities.” These actions, he said, violate “international norms relating to freedoms of expression and association and the principle of legality.”

Regardless of the outcome of the nuclear negotiations, the U.S. should reaffirm its commitment to advancing human rights in Iran. That means making the removal of sanctions contingent on tangible improvements in Iran’s human-rights situation. This would include releasing political prisoners and halting executions for political crimes or for which there was no due process of law.

A nuclear agreement would reportedly lift general sanctions on Iran. Still, the U.S. can and should hold the regime accountable for its abuses by imposing individual sanctions on the most egregious human-rights abusers wherever they live, through either an executive order or a new global version of the Magnitsky Act.

The U.S. should also establish a Congressional-Executive Commission on Iran to monitor Iran’s compliance with international human-rights standards. This body, modeled after a similar commission on China, would submit an annual report to Congress and the president, ensuring that the U.S. maintains a mechanism to examine, debate and report on Iran’s human-rights record.

Finally, the U.S. should dramatically increase funding for civil society and human-rights groups in Iran—and support similar efforts around the world.

There have been serious concerns expressed about the specific parameters of the

nuclear deal as the June 30 deadline approaches. These questions are critical and worthy of debate, but they should not let us forget the broader aspirations of the Iranian people to be free. Regardless of any nuclear deal, the U.S. needs to serve notice that it will not provide Tehran with a license to act against its own people with impunity.

Mr. Genser is an associate of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University and has served as pro bono counsel to Abdolfattah Soltani. Ms. Birkenthal is a fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy's Penn Kemble Youth Forum on Democracy.