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## HEADLINES

### IRAN'S PRESIDENT PAYS LANDMARK VISIT TO BAGHDAD

*By Jeffrey Donovan*



**With President Mahmud Ahmadinejad set to pay a landmark visit to Iraq on March 2 -- the first by an Iranian leader since the 1979 Islamic revolution -- history's ironies are running thick and fast.**

Two decades ago, after an eight-year war with Iraq that consumed some 1 million lives, Tehran stood largely defeated. Iran's ruling clerics, bitter foes of the United States, had achieved none of their war aims: they had failed to topple Saddam Hussein, to secure a border treaty, or to extract war reparations from Iraq.

Unlike the prostrate power it was in 1988, Tehran today is the most influential regional actor in Iraq. Its clout in Iraq extends across the board: in economic, political, security, and religious ties that deepen by the day -- despite the ongoing presence of some 158,000 U.S. troops nearly five years after the invasion. So influential is Iran in Iraq's Shi'ite regions that a leading British daily ran a darkly humorous headline over a story last year about the southern city of Al-Basrah: "Welcome to Tehran."

"If you travel to southern Iraq, you'll see it is the only place in the world, apart from Iran itself, where the Iranian currency, the rial, is used," says Anoushiravan Ehtashami, a professor of international relations at Britain's University of Durham. "That demonstrates Tehran's economic influence on its neighbor. Today, many personalities in Iraq's military and religious circles are those who were expelled from Iraq or threatened by Saddam Hussein. Iran offered them asylum and freedom. Some of them have families in Iran. It was obvious that when these people took power after Saddam, they wouldn't look south, north, or west. They would look east -- and they would see Iran."

## Growing Influence

Ahmadinejad's two-day trip -- which comes amid a major Shi'ite religious event in the holy city of Karbala attended by hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims -- appears intended to drive home the message that Tehran is a major regional power able to play a positive, or negative, role in the neighboring Arab state. It is a message aimed in particular at Washington, which accuses Iran of arming and supporting Iraqi Shi'ite militias behind a number of attacks, including on U.S. forces.

Ahmadinejad's visit to Baghdad is also seen as a show of Iranian support for the Shi'ite-led government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. In another twist of irony, that same government's chief ally and security guarantor is the United States. Ahmadinejad is scheduled to hold talks with al-Maliki and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. Other details of his visit, such as whether he will travel to holy sites at Karbala or Al-Najaf, are less clear.

But officials from both countries are expected to sign several bilateral agreements, including on oil, energy, and transportation, and investment. They are also expected to acknowledge progress made toward settling a border dispute and formalizing a peace treaty to replace the cease-fire that ended the war in July 1988.

For its part, the United States has sought to characterize the Iranian leader's visit as part of normal neighborly relations. "This is a bilateral visit," Philip Reeker, a spokesman at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, said this week. "These two countries need to have a relationship."

The United States has repeatedly accused Iran of fomenting instability in Iraq. In May 2007, Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, held the first of three rounds of unprecedented talks in Baghdad with Iranian officials. Crocker said the talks focused on Washington's "direct, specific concerns about their behavior in Iraq, their support for militias that are fighting both the Iraqi security forces and coalition forces, the fact that a lot of the explosives and ammunition that are used by these groups are coming in from Iran, that such activities, led by the [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] Qods Force, needed to cease and that we would be looking for results."

The United States was also looking forward to a fourth round of talks, scheduled for mid-February. But at Iran's request, those talks were canceled. No date for a new meeting was given.

Aziz Jabur Shayal, a professor of political science at Baghdad's Al-Mustansiriyah University, says Ahmadinejad's visit has as much to do with Iran's ties with Iraq as it does with Tehran's troubles with Washington. Faced with intense international pressure over its nuclear program, including a possible vote on March 1 by the UN Security Council on fresh sanctions against Iran, "Iran has problems with the United States and with the world -- that is why it is seeking any outlet to relieve it of international pressure," Shayal says.

"That is why Iran is turning to Iraq in order to show the world that is a cooperative country, that it is regionally important, and that it has influence in Iraq that enables it to play either a negative or positive role that would affect American strategy and policy," Shayal adds. "This visit is aimed along these lines, in addition to bilateral cooperation. The visit is aimed at crisis management, or at managing relations between the United States and Iran."

## **Welcome Visitors?**

Besides Iran's impact on Iraqi politics and security, there are growing economic ties, some of them related to the religious bonds the countries share.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims travel yearly to Iraqi Shi'ite shrines. Iran is building an airport for pilgrims to fly to Al-Najaf and Karbala, where millions of Shi'a gathered on February 28 to celebrate Arba'in, a religious ritual that marks the death in 680 of Imam Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson.

Still, not everyone in Iraq is thrilled with the economic results of what U.S. scholar Vali Nasr has dubbed the "Shi'ite Revival."

In interviews with RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq, hotel operators in Karbala this week complained that Iranians receive cut-rate deals arranged by an Iranian tour operator, the Shamsa Company, that has cornered the market. Adal Ra'uf, one hotel owner, echoes others in saying Iraqis would prefer to receive more Arab visitors.

"The rates paid by the Iranian pilgrims are very low and are not in proportion with the services provided to them," about \$15 for one night with three meals, Ra'uf says. "Gulf visitors are paying between \$30 and \$50 for the same services. Hotel costs are very high: generator-fuel is commercial, as are consumables in the hotel, in addition to the cost of labor and foodstuffs."

Some Iraqi small-business men also complain that Iran has imposed stiff taxes on goods bought in Iraq, while flooding Iraqi markets with cheaply made Iranian goods. They say Iraq's government has done little to rectify a trade imbalance that one analyst told Radio Free Iraq may earn Tehran up to \$7 billion a year.

But others note that Iranian investment is vital to Iraq's revival. "Trade relations between Iran and Iraq, particularly in Kurdistan, go back a long way," says Taha Zangana, a senior official with the Investment Agency of northern Iraq's Kurdish region. "We want a real partnership in investments, and I believe the Iranian president is bringing a proposal for investment in the Iraqi governorates bordering Iran. It calls for bold and willing Iranian firms to come to Kurdistan and embark on major business activity."

*With contributions from RFE/RL's Radio Farda in Prague and Radio Free Iraq correspondents in Baghdad, Karbala, and Irbil.*

## IRANIAN ACTIVISTS CONDEMN WORKERS' LASHING SENTENCES

*By Roozbeh Bolhari*



**Labor rights activists and prominent human rights figures have condemned the lashing sentences that have been handed down in recent weeks to 11 workers in the Iranian province of Kurdistan.**

So far, four workers and labor activists -- Sedigh Amjadi, Latifollah Kalakani, and Fars Gavalian and Sedigh Hosseini -- have been lashed by authorities for disrupting public order and participating in an unauthorized gathering.

The three are among 11 other activists who were arrested by security forces during last year's May Day celebrations in Sanandaj.

The detainees were each sentenced to 10 lashes and 91 days in prison for their demonstration on May 1, 2007. Two of the workers were sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison, a verdict that was later reviewed by Kurdistan Province's appeals court and changed to 10 lashes, and a fine of 200,000 tumans (about \$200).

Khaled Savari, the head of the National Union of Dismissed and Unemployed Workers, has also been sentenced to 10 lashes. "What crime have we committed? Have we broken any doors or windows? Have we set a car on fire? The only thing we did was to complain about our wages and other workers' issues in front of the employment office," Savari tells Radio Farda. "That's all we did."

Worker Tayyeb Molaie was also sentenced to 10 lashes. He also denounced the sentence as unfair, and added that the sentences come amid growing state and economic pressure on workers and their families. He asks whether "a worker who has reached the point of helplessness -- in which he cannot support himself or his family, and asks for some kind of improvement on Labor Day -- be punished with lashes?"

In the past two years, state pressure on workers has increased and a number of them have been detained, imprisoned, and intimidated. But the lashing sentences are unprecedented.

Shirin Ebadi, the head of the Tehran-based Center for Defenders of Human Rights and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, tells Radio Farda that the sentences are very alarming.

"A long time ago, the world reached the conclusion that the purpose of punishment is to correct a criminal's behavior and not to take revenge on the individual by enforcing physical punishment on him," Ebadi says. "Therefore, all physical punishments such as lashings, stonings, and hand amputations are strictly forbidden according to the International Convention Against Torture."

Meanwhile, the National Union of Dismissed and Unemployed Workers, who organized the May Day celebrations in Sanandaj, has denounced the sentences as inhumane and sent a formal complaint to the International Labor Organization.

The sentences have also been criticized by two parliament deputies, Soheila Jolodarzadeh and Mohammad Ali Moghniai, who have called for a special committee to be created to investigate the matter.

Ebrahim Madadi, the deputy head of the Tehran bus drivers' union, was quoted by the "Dastranj" website as saying that the sentences against the workers are an attempt by officials to enforce order and obedience in society. Madadi, who was himself released from prison a few months ago, said that the enforcement of these verdicts has caused surprise and concern.

Detained worker Molaie says that the enforcement of the lashing sentences is a clear contradiction between the government's slogans and its actions. He says he has repeatedly heard the government proclaim "equality and brotherhood" and claim that there is no oppression in Iran. But he says these lashing sentences against workers are "sad proof" that the Iranian government's actions contradict its slogans.

Several Iranian websites, including dastranj.ir, a website dedicated to workers' issues, have reported that the carrying out of the verdicts has angered a lot of people in Kurdistan.

"Workers at the Shahoo factory have firmly announced they will all gather in front of the Sanandaj courthouse to declare that if [I] receive lashes, they would want to be punished the same way," convicted activist Savari tells Radio Farda.

It is not clear when Savari will receive his punishment.

## ACTIVIST 'DYNAMIC DUO' FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN

*By Farangis Najibullah*



**He's spent almost a third of his life in prison as a political dissident. She's been arrested many times on myriad charges. Together, Taqi Rahmani and Narges Mohammadi are a dynamic duo of political activism -- husband-and-wife "superheroes" fighting human rights abuses by Iran's theocratic regime.**

It's not easy. But despite the regular time in prison -- an increasingly common fact of life for Iranian activists, particularly during an intensified crackdown on dissent ahead of parliamentary elections next month -- the couple vows to continue its campaign to defend human rights in the Islamic republic.

Rahmani is the author of some 26 books and articles on religious modernism. In 2005, the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch awarded Rahmani the Hellman/Hammett grant -- a prize that the group bestows on writers targeted for expressing views that governments do not want reported.

The 47-year-old has long been critical of the relationship between religion and politics in Iran. He says that theocratic rule has had an undeniably negative impact on his country's democratic development.

"As a Muslim who supports freedom and democracy, I am opposed to a number of principles and positions of the Islamic republic," Rahmani says. "That's how I got involved in politics as an author and activist. I belong to a movement that is known in Iran as a nationalist-religious movement. This movement believes that religion should serve civil society. It also believes that all Iranians have equal rights, and that they should be seen as equal citizens despite their different viewpoints. For these ideas, I've spent more than 14 years in prison."

Rahmani's wife knows all about prison, too. A 36-year-old mother of two, Mohammadi is an engineer by day. But her passion is the rights of political prisoners and women. She is a spokeswoman for the Iranian Center for Defenders of Human Rights, the organization led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi.

Ebadi says both Mohammadi and her husband are well-known and well-respected among Iranian intellectuals and rights supporters, though the couple has paid a heavy price to gain such respect.

"Being a human rights activist in Iran is not easy work," Ebadi says. "It's not easy to work in this field. But we shouldn't forget that Iranian women, including Mohammadi, have a willpower far greater than all the difficulties they face."

### **University Activism**

Mohammadi's political activities began during her student days at Qazvin University, where she studied physics and engineering.

It was at Qazvin where she met her future husband. Rahmani used to teach evening classes where participants -- including students, journalists, and teachers -- would discuss politics, human rights, and the role of religion in society. Rahmani says favorite topics included Islam and human rights, Islam and democracy, and Islam and civil society.

Mohammadi soon swapped her favorite hobby, mountain climbing, for a new one -- politics and human rights. In Iran, it was to prove a high mountain to climb.



Narges Mohammadi has fought for prisoners and women (ISNA)

She became known as a key activist at university and soon followed in Rahmani's footsteps by writing articles in independent newspapers criticizing the human rights situation in the country. It was the late 1990s, a favorable time for independent publications increasing in number under reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

By the time he met Narges, Rahmani had already served two prison terms -- 11 years in total -- for expressing his political views through books and articles.

In 1981, Rahmani was imprisoned for three years for his writings in an underground publication, "Pishtaz." Five years later he was arrested again, and sentenced to eight years in prison for his writing on religion and politics.

Rahmani resumed his work as a writer and journalist following his latest release from prison. But most newspapers remain reluctant to publish his work.

"Because of existing pressures, newspapers nowadays do not publish our articles," Rahmani says. "Generally, in countries like Iran, newspapers do not have too much freedom. They cannot publish whatever they want. There are certain conditions that usually create problems and restrictions for newspapers."

Both husband and wife have worked for reformist newspapers and magazines, including "Iran-e Farda" (Tomorrow's Iran,) a reformist publication that has subsequently been banned.

### **A Marriage Made In Prison**

The couple got married in 2001, only to be separated soon afterward when Rahmani was again sentenced to two separate jail terms between 2001 and 2005.

In one case, Rahmani and two fellow journalists were arrested on the orders of Tehran's chief prosecutor. They spent almost two years under arbitrary detention without being charged.

Her husband's numerous arrests helped turn Mohammadi's attention to the plight of political prisoners in Iran. She began campaigning against the practice of putting people behind bars for merely expressing their opinion.

Mohammadi has publicly criticized the authorities for violating "the most basic principles of law -- keeping people in prison illegally, without charge, sentence, and trial." She says defense lawyers in many cases can't even get access to their imprisoned clients' files.

For such criticism, Mohammadi has twice been imprisoned. With firsthand experience of life behind bars, Mohammadi now tries to assist jailed dissidents and their families. Through the Center for Defenders of Human Rights, she provides lawyers for political prisoners who cannot afford to pay for their defense. The center also offers legal advice and counseling for dissidents' family members when necessary.

Mohammadi tells RFE/RL that the center's members want to raise people's awareness of their social, political, and human rights through media, meetings, and discussions. They also publish regular reports on human rights to attract domestic and international attention to the issue.

Are Mohammadi and her husband afraid of more time in prison -- or worse? "In Iran, you don't have to be a human rights activist to get arrested," she says. "In our country, many teachers and workers are put in jail merely for asking the government to increase their wages. Students are put behind bars for wanting their own publications. The Iranian government does not tolerate any criticism."

But is the sacrifice of Mohammadi and other Iranian rights defenders, scores of whom have been jailed in recent weeks, paying off?

Abdulfattah Sultani believes it is. A Center for Defenders of Human Rights founding member, Sultani says rights activism in Iran is not a line of work that shows quick results. However, he believes that activists such as Mohammadi and Rahmani have already brought positive change to Iranian society.

"Nowadays, the authorities are trying to comply with human rights -- at least, they try to make it seem that way," Sultani says. "They are trying to improve prison conditions. With regard to women's issues, society has gradually accepted the fact that patriarchic laws should be abolished. Several religious leaders in the city of Qom recently issued a religious decree, which says women have equal rights to compensation, and that a woman's evidence is no longer equal only to half of a man's evidence."

Mohammadi, for her part, says Iranian society is moving toward democratic changes and better human rights conditions. She believes there is "no going back."

"Iranian society is rapidly moving toward claiming its right to democracy," she says. "Students, workers, teachers, women, and young people -- these different groups have serious claims, and the government has to answer them. The government has to give them a satisfying response. It's not a question of a handful of people -- it is about an entire nation."

It's also about a brave couple that fell in love. And dared to speak truth to power.

## TEHRAN DISMISSES ALLEGED EVIDENCE OF SECRET NUCLEAR PROGRAM



**A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate released in December 2007 said Iran appeared to have frozen its efforts to build nuclear weapons in 2003.**

But documents submitted to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on February 25 suggest that Iran continued work on nuclear weapons beyond that date. The material was presented to the IAEA's 35-nation board in Vienna by the IAEA's head of safeguards, Olli Heinonen.

Britain's ambassador to the IAEA, Simon Smith, says the material came from multiple sources and included designs for a nuclear warhead. Smith also says the documents included information on how a nuclear warhead would perform and how it could be fitted onto a missile.

Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, angrily denounced the documents as "forgeries."

Meanwhile, Iran's UN ambassador, Mohammad Khazai, has accused an Iranian opposition group of delivering fabricated evidence to Washington.

Khazai told AP that the United States is getting unreliable intelligence from a group called the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO). The MKO was allied with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and is listed as a terrorist organization by Iran, the United States, and the European Union.

There was no immediate confirmation about whether the MKO was one of the sources of the alleged evidence. But Mohammad Mohaddesin, a senior official in a coalition of Iranian opposition groups called the National Council of Resistance of Iran, says his organization had presented the IAEA with evidence supporting the charges. The opposition coalition includes the MKO.

Mohaddesin says the evidence given by his coalition to the IAEA proves that the Iranian regime is still working on nuclear weapons and has even accelerated its arms program since 2003.

In particular, Mohaddesin says the evidence proves beyond any doubt that the Iranian regime is working to produce a nuclear warhead in Khojir, a facility on the southeast edge of Tehran.

Mohaddesin told AP that if the Iranian regime is sincere in its claims that it is not trying to produce nuclear weapons, it should open the doors of the Khojir facility to the UN's nuclear inspectors.

The documents emerged after the IAEA announced in a report on February 22 that Iran has been more transparent about its declared nuclear program than in the past.

But IAEA Director-General Muhammad el-Baradei also said that Tehran still is not doing enough to clear up international concerns about whether it also has a secret, undeclared nuclear-weapons program.

"In addition to our work to clarify Iran's past nuclear activities, we have to make sure, naturally, that Iran's current activities are also exclusively for peaceful purposes," el-Baradei said on February 22. "And for that, we have been asking Iran to conclude the so-called Additional Protocol -- which gives us additional authority to visit places, additional authority to have additional documents -- to be able to provide assurances not only that Iran's declared activities are for peaceful purposes, but there are also no undeclared activities."

State media reports in Iran focused on el-Baradei's praise for Iran and the greater transparency it has provided, but widely ignored his plea for increased cooperation from Tehran on current nuclear activities.

That has led to officials in Tehran and Washington issuing conflicting claims about the IAEA report. Iranian officials call it a "victory" for Tehran while, at the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says the report justifies a fresh round of UN sanctions against Iran.

The UN Security Council is expected to vote on a possible third round of sanctions against Iran later this week for its defiance of a council demand that it suspend all uranium enrichment until it has allayed suspicions about its nuclear program.

Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad says the latest IAEA report vindicates Iran. He also has threatened unspecified "decisive reciprocal measures" against any country that supports additional sanctions against Iran.