



**The Meir Amit Intelligence
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Spotlight on Iran

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Editor: Raz Zimmt



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Iran's behavior with regard to release of American woman: Iranian political fickleness or reflection of domestic power struggles?

Iranian media reported last weekend that Sarah Emily Shourd, one of the three Americans detained along the Iran-Iraq border in July 2009 and accused of illegal border crossing and espionage against Iran, was to be released as a gesture to mark Eid ul-Fitr.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said that the decision to release the American woman for the holiday was made after her case had been examined by top

Iranian officials including President Ahmadinejad, and was also motivated by the compassion and respect accorded to women in Islam and in the Islamic republic (Mehr, September 10). The chief of press affairs at the Ministry of Islamic Guidance declared that the American national would be released on Saturday, September 10, at a ceremony held in Tehran's international Esteqlal Hotel (IRNA, September 10).

It wasn't long before Tehran's Prosecutor General Abbas Ja'fari Dowlatabadi released a statement saying that the woman's release was canceled since the legal proceedings concerning her were still under way. Any decision about the three American nationals depends on the completion of legal proceedings, the prosecutor general said in his statement (Mehr, September 11). Forced to respond to the prosecutor general's statement, Mohammad Hassan Salehi, chief of Telecommunications and Information Department at the president's office, said that the release was, in fact, postponed, and that further details would be released later (IRNA, September 11). Earlier this week, the prosecutor general called a press conference where he announced that the American woman was to be released on a bail of about \$500,000. Dowlatabadi criticized the involvement of the executive branch in the affair, claiming it had no authority to intervene in matters pertaining to the judiciary (Mehr, September 12).

The Iranian media published extensive reports on developments in the affair, which was immediately exploited by the president's critics to once again slam the president and his government for their conduct. Alef, a website affiliated with the president's critics in the conservative camp, claimed that the government's decision to release information about the young American woman's release before legal proceedings were complete was improper. A commentary article published by the website said that the decision made by the president and his government was a blatant intervention in the matters of the judiciary and an impingement on its independence. The release of any suspect before the necessary legal proceedings concerning them are complete erodes the status of the judiciary. The website further stated that, in such a politically sensitive affair, it was inappropriate to release information on Shourd's release before legal proceedings against her were complete seeing as that could discredit Iran's judiciary in the eyes of the international community. The president must not become involved in legal cases handled by the judiciary in a way that could compromise it, the article said (Alef, September 11).



The three Americans meet their families in May 2010 (www.presstv.ir)

Jaras, a website affiliated with reformist opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi, also said that the constitution of Iran gives the Supreme Leader, not the president, the right to pardon prisoners when requested to do so by the judiciary chief. In addition, the website mentioned the incident involving 15 British sailors detained by Iran's armed forces in the Persian Gulf in March 2007 and released under the president's orders 13 days later, claiming that the president had overstepped his authority when he announced that the sailors were granted a pardon for Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The website further claimed that it was an unfathomable decision to grant a pardon to the American woman while Iranian political prisoners were still in jail more than a year after the riots which broke out following the presidential election (Jaras, September 11).

In recent months, there have been strong differences of opinion between the executive branch, headed by President Ahmadinejad, and the judiciary, headed by Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli Larijani. This past August, Larijani voiced strong criticism of the president following a remark made by Ahmadinejad about the functioning of the judiciary, at a meeting with journalists. Larijani noted that the president's style of speech was inappropriate, and that his criticism of the judiciary reflected a lack of understanding of the law and of its implementation. Sadeq Larijani is the brother of Majles speaker Ali Larijani, one of President Ahmadinejad's major opponents in the conservative camp.

Majles Research Center chairman says Majles is running out of patience with president's violations of law

Conservative Majles member and Majles Research Center chairman Ahmad Tavakoli sent a strongly-worded letter to President Ahmadinejad this week. In his letter, Tavakoli criticized the president for his continuing disregard for the law and warned him about the consequences of his current policy.

Tavakoli listed three examples of the government's continuing violations of the law: its decision to reduce working hours in the month of Ramadan, the shutdown of government offices and banks on the Saturday after Eid ul-Fitr (September 11), and the appointment of special foreign policy envoys by the president.

According to Tavakoli, the reduction of working hours during the month of fasting from 44 to 25 hours a week was illegal and detrimental to national production and employment. Regarding the government's decision to shut down government offices and banks the day after Eid ul-Fitr, Tavakoli noted that the authority to shut down the economy rested with the Majles, except in cases of severe air pollution that could pose a threat to public health. He said that the shutdown of government institutions led to discrimination between government and bank employees on one hand and the rest of Iranian workers on the other, causing considerable damage to the country's economy. Tavakoli also strongly criticized the president's decision to appoint special foreign policy envoys, saying it was unconstitutional as it was made without the approval of the government or the knowledge of the Majles. That decision, Tavakoli said, compromised the status of the Foreign Ministry and the Supreme Council for National Security, and contradicted the stated position of both the Supreme Leader, who spoke out against foreign policy redundancies, and the foreign minister.

Tavakoli wrote to the president that his government's legitimacy depended on following the Supreme Leader's instructions and acting in accordance with the law. Tavakoli concluded his letter by warning the president that the careful approach taken by the Majles to the government's violations of law would not last, and that the legislative branch was running out of patience (Alef, September 12).



Ahmad Tavakoli

Following the publication of the letter, Raja News, a website affiliated with government supporters, lashed out against Tavakoli and accused him of taking advantage of the Supreme Leader to prove his erroneous claims. The website rejected the claims made by Tavakoli, saying that the decisions made by the president on working hours during the month of

Ramadan, the shutdown of government offices for Eid ul-Fitr, and the appointment of envoys on foreign affairs were all legally under the government's authority. Referring to Tavakoli's criticism of the decision to shut down government offices for Eid ul-Fitr, Raja News claimed that the criticism was inappropriate considering the fact that Majles members, who refused to extend the Eid ul-Fitr vacation to three days, took a two-week vacation only one month after returning from a three-week summer holiday. The website accused Tavakoli of basing his claims on a misinterpretation of the constitution and of the Supreme Leader's statements, and of taking advantage of the Supreme Leader to settle political scores with the president (Raja News, September 13).

Pre-Islamic heritage in the Islamic republic: Cyrus Cylinder temporarily returned to Tehran

This week, Iran's media devoted significant attention to the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder from the British Museum to the National Museum of Iran, where it will remain on display during a four-month exhibition. The artifact is a clay cylinder inscribed with a version of the Cyrus Declaration in Akkadian. Made by King Cyrus the Great in 538 BC, the Cyrus Declaration permitted all the nations under his rule to go back to worshipping their own deities. The cylinder was discovered in 1879 by British Assyriologist Hormoz Rasam and was acquired by the British Museum in London. During the reign of the deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, particularly during the grand celebrations marking the 2500th anniversary of Iranian monarchy in October 1971, considerable importance was given to the Cyrus Declaration, which became one of the symbols of Iranian monarchy. As part of the attempts to nurture Iran's national culture and increase the Iranian public's awareness of its pre-Islamic past, the Cyrus Declaration was even portrayed as "the first human rights charter in history". The British Museum loaned the cylinder to Iran for the celebrations, and it remained there for several days.



In 2005, the cylinder was displayed in the British Museum during an exhibition dedicated to the ancient Persian Empire. Under a cultural cooperation agreement between Iran and the UK, the British Museum pledged to loan the cylinder to Iran last year for an exhibition in

Tehran. Following the riots which broke out after last summer's presidential election, the British Museum announced that the political circumstances made it impossible to transfer the cylinder to Iran, provoking strong reactions from top Iranian officials. Hamid Baqa'i, chief of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, harshly condemned the British Museum's announcement, saying that it was a breach of agreement signed between the two countries. He even threatened that if the British Museum did not meet its obligations, Iran would freeze its cultural and scientific cooperation with Britain and would not allow British researchers to take part in archaeological excavations in Iran.

This week, the cylinder was brought to Iran under heavy security along with a team of British experts headed by John Curtis, keeper of the British Museum's Near-east department. The exhibition where the cylinder is currently on display was opened Sunday with a ceremony attended by President Ahmadinejad. At the ceremony, the president spoke in favor of Cyrus, saying that he followed in the footsteps of the prophets and that his charter of human rights was a reflection of respect for human beings, protection of the oppressed, and standing up to the oppressors. Exhibiting the cylinder in Iran, Ahmadinejad said, reaffirms the values and principles which humanity needs now more than ever, and reflects the abilities of the Iranian people, who throughout history have carried the banner of justice and proven willing to sacrifice themselves to further Islamic thought. The caravan of the Iranian people has embarked on a journey to revitalize the new civilization on the basis of belief in one god, love, and justice, and no force can stop it, the president said (Fars, September 12).

The president's remarks are yet another expression of the efforts mounted by the Iranian regime in recent years to integrate pre-Islamic traditions with an Islamic worldview. The combination between the Iranian cultural component and the Shi'ite Islamic component in Iranian national identity was evident, for example, in President Ahmadinejad's comments on the Iranian New Year (Nowruz). In his 2008 Nowruz address, Ahmadinejad said that Nowruz was a testimony of divine grace and a day which heralded the realization of God's sovereignty over all things. Nowruz thought, the president added, is the thought of anticipation of the return of the Vanished Imam.

It came as no surprise that the loan of the cylinder to Iran sparked criticism from some of the government's opponents. One Iranian blogger commented on the issue in a column titled "Cyrus' human rights charter reaches the stronghold of human rights violations". The blogger wrote that it was inappropriate for the first human rights charter in history to be given to a government which suppresses the rights of its citizens and combats human rights activists. The cylinder will be displayed behind glass in front of tyrant rulers, in front of Iranian citizens suppressed by Revolutionary Guards and Basij and robbed of their rights, and in front of

political prisoners in jails. When Cyrus the Great wrote his declaration, he never imagined that one day it would be a “foreign guest” in his land (www.greencorrespondents.com, September 10).

The conservative daily Keyhan argued this week that the cylinder must not be returned to the UK. A report on the loan of the cylinder said that it was one of the creations of Iranian civilization, and that a temporary loan to Iran was not enough. The cylinder is connected with Iran, not with the British government, and must not be returned to those who stole it (Keyhan, September 12).

Eid ul-Fitr prayers in Iran: for Shi'ite Muslims only

Sunni Online, a website affiliated with the religious center used by the Sunni minority in the city of Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchestan Province, reported this week that internal security forces prevented Sunni worshippers from performing prayers on Eid ul-Fitr. The website reported that security forces broke into several meeting places, including private residences where Sunni worshippers were praying, and prevented them from continuing their prayers, led by Sunni clerics (www.sunnionline.us, September 9).

The website also reported that Molavi Abdolhamid, the Friday prayer leader of the Sunni community in Zahedan, strongly criticized the authorities' attitude towards Iranian Sunni Muslims. During his Eid ul-Fitr sermon, the top Sunni cleric said that the pressure exerted by the authorities on the Sunni minority has stepped up considerably in recent years.

He further added that, after the revolution, the Sunnis hoped that the new regime would establish peace and harmony between Iran's Shi'ites and Sunnis, but those hopes went unfulfilled. Instead of becoming a model of Sunni-Shi'ite harmony for the whole world, Iran continues to discriminate against its Sunni population. Abdolhamid complained about the authorities' increasing harassment of schools and religious centers used by the Sunnis. He noted that the Sunnis' constitutional rights of holding their religious ceremonies and educating their children in accordance with their religious beliefs were not upheld in practice.



Molavi Abdolhamid (www.sunnionline.ws)

Speaking about the restrictions imposed by the authorities on Sunni prayers on Eid ul-Fitr, Abdolhamid said that the Sunnis never thought the day would come when the authorities would prevent a few hundred worshippers from praying in accordance with their beliefs, even if it's in their own homes. Not only does the regime refuse to let even one Sunni mosque operate in Tehran, now it even prevents the Sunnis living in Zahedan from performing the holiday prayers. The Islamic republic, said the cleric, must encourage prayer instead of preventing it. There are Sunni mosques in the capitals of all the countries in the world with the exception of Iran, and now the authorities do not allow Sunnis to pray even in a place that is not a mosque.

Abdolhamid stressed that the Sunnis are loyal to Iran, that they object to any expression of violence, and are committed to national unity and protection of Iran's independence and borders. They insist, however, that their constitutional rights should be upheld by the authorities. He called on the Supreme Leader to deal with the issues facing the Sunnis to preserve the unity of the Iranian people and sustain public trust of the regime (www.sunnionline.us, September 11).

Sunnis currently make up about 8 percent of Iran's population, and are a majority among the Kurds, Baluchis, and Turkmens living in Iran.

First cracks in Iran's policy of boycotting Israeli athletes?

The sports sections of Iran's news websites have devoted considerable attention this week to a report saying that Iran's vice president and head of Physical Education Organization Ali Saeedlou has recently sent Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei a letter asking for his instructions on the participation of Iranian athletes in competitions against Israeli sportsmen.

The affair began when Iranian wrestler Taleb Ne'matpour was forced to withdraw from the World Wrestling Championship in Moscow last week when he was drawn against an Israeli

opponent. In an interview given by Mohammad Reza Yazdani-Khorram, head of the Iranian Wrestling Federation, following Ne'matpour's withdrawal, he said that Iran had lost a definite chance to win a medal and reach the second or third place at the world championship. He added that over the past thirty years, Iran had paid a heavy price to protect the rights of the Palestinian people, and even noted that the issue deserves considerable thought. According to Yazdani-Khorram, Saeedlou sent the Supreme Leader a letter about the issue (ILNA, September 7).

Following Yazdani-Khorram's remarks, several top sports personalities criticized Saeedlou for sending the letter, saying that it undermined Iran's principle of boycotting Israeli athletes. Mohammad Ali Abadi, chairman of Iran's National Olympic Committee, said in an interview to ISNA News Agency that he was not aware of the letter sent by Saeedlou and expressed reservations about it. According to Abadi, Iranian sports organizations must follow the regime's policy towards the "Zionist regime" and boycott all competitions in which Israeli athletes take part.

Behzad Katira'i, formerly a senior Physical Education Organization official, also stated that he was adamantly opposed to Saeedlou's letter. He noted that it has always been the organization's view that ideological principles come first, and any matters pertaining to championships and medals come second. Iran's is an Islamic regime based on principles and beliefs for which Iran paid dearly, Abadi said. Opposition to Israel has always been one of the principles of the revolution, and that principle must be followed. He claimed that the sports community must condemn Saeedlou for sending the letter, and that Iranian athletes must express their hostility towards Israel wherever possible.

On the other hand, Bahram Efsharzadeh, secretary of the National Olympic Committee, said that the letter was of critical importance. He noted that while Iran's non-recognition of Israel is one of the regime's chief principles, a solution must be found to the problem facing Iran on the international sports scene as a result of its refusal to compete against athletes from Israel (ISNA, September 13).

As a result of the outrage sparked by the report on Saeedlou's letter, the Physical Education Organization released a statement denying that any such letter was sent (Fars, September 13). In addition, in an interview granted to ISNA, Iranian Wrestling Federation head Yazdani-Khorram stressed that he did not object to boycotting Israeli athletes and that he had always supported the struggle of the Palestinian people and expressed his strong opposition to Israel (ISNA, September 13).

Pictures of the week: demonstrators across Iran protest Quran burning in the US



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