

Policy Watch: Haleh Esfandiari's plight

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An Iranian-American scholar who directs the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington was jailed in Tehran earlier this week.

Haleh Esfandiari had gone to Iran late last year to visit her elderly mother and was on her way to Tehran airport to return home on Dec. 30 when she was robbed of her American and Iranian passports. She was then held under what amounted to house arrest and subjected to repeated interrogation about her activities at the Wilson Center. There was hope that the Iranian authorities would allow her to leave, but on May 8 she was sent to Tehran's infamous Evin Prison.

Esfandiari is not the only Iranian-American scholar or journalist currently being detained in Iran. She is, however, the only one being detained who I know. Her husband, Professor Shaul Bakhash, is a colleague of mine at George Mason University. I also worked at the Wilson Center from 1985 to 1987 and have participated in more of its conferences and seminars than I can remember since then.

In addition to arranging seminars about other parts of the Middle East, she organized numerous meetings about Iran, with seminars often featuring speakers from that country. At a time when Iranian-American relations have been so tense, the seminars she arranged were an important forum for Iranian-American dialogue.

This, however, is apparently what the Iranian authorities were suspicious of and wanted to put a stop to. They appear to believe that Esfandiari and the Wilson Center were bent on fomenting democratic revolution in Iran. However, neither the Iranian-American dialogues she sponsored nor those who participated in them could possibly do this.

What is especially ironic is that many of those who addressed her seminars were critical of the Bush administration's hard-line approach to Iran and recommended softening it as a means of improving relations. Given the high profile of her seminar series, I have no doubt that the Ahmadinejad regime was well aware of this long before it detained her. Ahmadinejad is also undoubtedly well aware that sending Esfandiari to prison will only worsen ties between Washington and Tehran and make any kind of Iranian-American dialogue more difficult.

What this suggests is that Ahmadinejad is actually far more afraid of having friendly ties with the United States than with having confrontational relations with it. Hostility between Washington and Tehran allows him to justify repression and blame America for everything going wrong in Iran. Friendly Iranian-American relations, by contrast, would undermine his ability to do this and focus domestic attention on his own policy failings.

While neither Esfandiari nor the Wilson Center has the capacity to promote democratic revolution in Iran, Ahmadinejad is undoubtedly aware that many Iranians -- especially university students -- increasingly want democratization. Tehran seeks to discredit the demand for democratization by portraying those who seek it as "American agents." Detaining an Iranian-American scholar who puts on seminars where the prospects for democracy in Iran (among other issues) are discussed is an attempt to "prove" this.

Detaining Esfandiari, though, will not dampen the growing demand for democracy in Iran. Indeed, it could backfire on him if hers becomes a cause celebre that increases it instead. Ahmadinejad would be well advised to release her and let her return safely home before this happens.

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