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Behind the Islamic Republic's Bluster

The regime's rants about closing the Strait of Hormuz divert the world's attention from the thousands of political prisoners in its jails.

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The clerical regime that misrules Iran is imploding in slow-motion while intensifying its repression at home and threatening behavior abroad. But is the international community doing all it can to support the Iranian people and hold the Iranian regime to account?

It's clear that the leadership in Tehran is wracked by internal strife, with divisions deepening between Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies. Iran's economy is in tatters, with inflation and unemployment soaring thanks to decades of mismanagement. While popular discontent is not at a high pitch as it was after the June 2009 presidential election, the fundamental conflict between citizens and dictators continues to smolder. Externally, the regime's defiance of international norms—such as this week threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz—have left Iran more isolated than ever.

In response, the regime has created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, renewing its crackdown against students, civil society leaders, and human rights defenders like my friend and colleague Nasrin Sotoudeh. Nasrin earned the enmity of Iran's rulers by accepting the cases of dissidents and challenging Iranian laws that deprive women and children of their fundamental rights. She was also involved in the "One Million Signatures Campaign" to abolish discriminatory laws against women in Iran.

On Sept. 4, 2010, Iranian authorities arrested Nasrin on charges of spreading propaganda against the state, acting against national security, donning improper hijab in a filmed speech, and membership in the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, the nongovernmental organization that I cofounded. She was denied bail, access to a lawyer and other procedural rights. Then, in January 2010, the regime sentenced her to 11 years in prison and barred her from practicing law for another 20.

Nasrin has spent the subsequent days in prison, most of them in solitary confinement. She has rarely been granted permission to receive visits from her family.

Her two young children have been traumatized by their mother's ordeal. On the few occasions when they have been allowed to see her, relatives report, the children have wailed inconsolably. Nasrin's husband was denied the right to see his wife several times. Nasrin has gone on two hunger strikes to protest her ill-treatment at the hands of the regime; her health is of grave concern.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded its investigation of Nasrin's case in May and has recently released its opinion. It found the Islamic Republic in violation of its obligations under both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. "The detention of Ms. Nasrin Sotoudeh follows from the exercise of [her] rights and freedoms and her work as a human rights defender," the Working Group found. "There are no grounds to justify restriction of those rights."

Perhaps anticipating an unfavorable outcome in an international legal forum, the Iranian judiciary recently reduced Nasrin's prison term to six years. But every single day in prison is one too many. Her unconditional release—and that of thousands of other political prisoners languishing in the Islamic Republic's jails—is long past due.

The Iranian regime will not observe the basic principles of human rights for its own citizens without outside pressure. Thus the international community must engage Iranian human rights defenders and support them with concerted action. The U.N. Security Council should urgently take up the grave status of human rights in Iran. While the appointment of a special rapporteur on human rights in Iran earlier this year was a welcome first step, Tehran's intransigence and refusal to cooperate with him left the rapporteur unable to fulfill his mandate. Only the Security Council, with coercive levers at its disposal, can meaningfully pressure Iran's rulers to stop their violations of citizens' fundamental rights.

International sanctions against Iran's human-rights abusers should also be expanded and deepened. Policy makers in the U.S. and Europe deserve praise for sanctioning leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, agents of the intelligence ministry, and other top officials responsible for the violent crackdown that followed the 2009 uprising. But there is a second tier of less visible officials—including mid-ranking officers in the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij paramilitary, and the regular police force—who bear similar responsibility and deserve punishment. The U.S. and EU should freeze their assets and impose visa bans on these officials and their families. The International Criminal Court would also have ample evidence to prosecute these offenders if empowered by the Security Council to do so.

Finally, the international community must more vigorously highlight the suffering of the Iranian people. To bring about the day when Nasrin and other Iranian dissidents can walk freely in the streets of Iran, we need a plan guided by moral vision. This requires the international community to act boldly in line with its highest ideals.

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