



Meeting Report

Refugee Rights in Iran

Dr Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Prize Laureate and human rights
campaigner

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Introduction

Shirin Ebadi was the first Muslim woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. Dr Ebadi practices law in Tehran and has a long history of campaigning for women's and children's rights in Iran. This visit to the UK represents a rare opportunity to engage with one of Iran's leading dissident voices directly.

Dr Ebadi's latest publication, 'Refugee Rights in Iran' will be of great interest to anyone concerned with the needs of refugees. It will also serve as an essential reference for policy-makers promoting refugee rights in Islamic states. Dr Ebadi argues that there is nothing inherent in the legal structure of Islamic states that prevents them from upholding basic human rights for refugees, and she reveals how these rights are protected in Iran, a country where the Islamic legal system is predominant.

Dr Shirin Ebadi [transcript]:

I am here to launch a book on the rights of refugees now translated in English...The book was translated into English with the help of the Norwegian government and the UN High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR]...all the proceeds will go to refugee children in Iran.

The reason why...I focus on refugees in Iran is because there are a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran. In addition...refugee rights are important in human rights law.

Afghan refugees first came to Iran following the USSR invasion of Afghanistan. At the time, with the established Islamic government...the country opened its borders to all who wished to enter...A large number, almost four million, entered into Iran.

But interestingly, though the government gave permission for refugees to enter, it never gave them refugee permits...As a result, they were denied the rights accorded to refugees. So I decided to write this book...The Iranian government signed conventions...and is therefore responsible for the provision of these conventions. When someone's rights have been taken from them, they need to seek rights by themselves.

People who advocate rights of these groups...also help empower marginalized groups. One aspect of empowerment is to help understand and gain the rights of empowerment. So I hope this book will be a small measure for these groups to recognize their rights. This book was written many years ago with the help of the UNHCR in Farsi and this year...has been republished and updated.

Now let me talk a little about the situation in the Middle East and the sources of conflict. This issue is not unrelated to the refugee crisis, as there are a large number of refugees all around the Middle East. It is a social phenomenon and one of the root causes is the refugee crisis in the Middle East.

The Middle East is open to numerous conflicts...People lose lives innocently because of war...and the changing map of the Middle East. Look at two non-binding resolutions of Congress for example. Iraq is divided into three parts (Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia). Although non-binding...we understand the consequences of these organs of government...So isn't it natural for Iraqis to ask why people thousands of kilometres away in the United States decide their policies, while they are suffering as a result of war?

There is a lack of democracy – or democracy is imperfect – in this part of the world. Democracy in many countries is denied...because of historical factors and reasons. The governments are not chosen by the people. There are elections but not true-level elections...Saddam for example had 99% of the votes...In Syria, the republic is in the son's hands...In UAE, there is no parliament: there is a group of princes and the royal family that gives recommendations only... Therefore, people are distanced from the government because the government ignores the demands and interests of the people and their opinions...and demands unheard turn to violence.

If peaceful coexistence doesn't exist, then there are no choices. What's more interesting is that the non-democratic countries of the region are friends of the US (Kuwait, UAE, etc). These satisfied people of the region know that a loss of US support would make them lose power so they don't feel good with the US democracy and look at it suspiciously.

The only exception in the region: Iran...which severed the relationship with the US after the revolution. Young people who are disenchanted with the US turn to Iran, a country that takes every opportunity to burn the US flag.

But can the Iranian government represent a good model for Islamic governance? No. Because the Iranian government is also criticized for violating human rights by its own people...people there too feel distanced from the government. Why? Because every day they are more impoverished...Iran is a wealth country...but close to ten million are close to poverty lines and that's official government statistics.

There are highly educated women. 65% of university students and university professors are women...Yet the society is still full of laws against women's rights...For example, two female witnesses [in a court] equal one male

witness...one female life is equal to half that of a man's...one damage claim is equal to half that of a man's.

There is high censorship in Iran...Many journalists were sent to prison and are still in prison for writing articles.

There are many things to cover but the lack of democracy is ignored by the government, which leads people to feel disenchanting. Interestingly, the government turned into a hero in the region because of its stance against the US...Arab youth are increasingly attracted to the Islamic government in Iran...The only way to reverse this trend is to stop supporting the non-democratic governments in the region.

The US must ban the sale of arms to non-democratic countries — but instead, the volume of sales increases every year. The US must reduce diplomatic relations with countries with no parliament...and the large western investments in places like Dubai.

Muslim people must be helped to understand that the government in Iran is not a suitable model...they must be shown human rights violations, and the consequences of Iranian policies domestically should be revealed so they understand that just opposing the US will not lead to a better place.

What of the role of women in Iran? They are highly educated...It has been hard to restore the rights of women in the past years...For example, there was a campaign of signatures to reverse laws, there is a committee of mothers for peace as a bridge between students (when arrested) and mothers...there is a general effort by the feminist movement to prevent the violation of human rights in the country...At times, the women try to participate at international conventions to raise awareness of human rights...connected with other women in the Middle East to advance women's rights and against United States foreign policy...They are therefore opposed to both US foreign policy and Iran domestic policy.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major cause of conflict in the Middle East...As long as the two entities are fighting, conflict will continue across the Middle East...How long will Israeli and Palestinian mothers suffer the death of their children? There are mothers who find ways to talk to each other...spreading voices of women to the rest of the world.

The military invasion of Iraq by the US has increased terrorism in the region...fundamentalism has increased exponentially...Over one million lost their lives since the invasion.

In a seminar with women I attended in Iraq, it was said that under Saddam, they fought one dictator; now so many other problems came to replace it, most importantly: safety, security, increased fundamentalism. Fundamentalism's first target is women, therefore women's legal status is worse than it was under Saddam Hussein...Iraqi women that were active under Saddam are now active against the US occupation that fuels fundamentalism...So there are two fronts: the military invaders, and the terrorists and fundamentalists.

Let me share a story with you...Iran suffered eight years of war with Iraq...including chemical weapons which crumbled 15 cities to the ground...and news footage at the time showed that Rumsfeld came to Saddam to assure US protection...how come then Saddam was not a dictator too?

So as long as we don't fix our mistakes, the Middle East will not see peace... I hope we will see a peaceful Middle East far away from conflicts and wars.

Q & A

- (a) Iran was recruiting Iraqi refugees during the war...do you think this is happening with Afghanistan? (b) What about Obama's position and challenge in the Middle East?

Dr Ebadi: (a) Iran forces Afghans outside of the country; the problem is why...the UN is trying to peacefully return them to their country....

(b) Israel must remain secure, just as Palestine must. Without two independent states, we won't have peace in the region.

- *How many signatures were collected in the women's petition...and how many parliamentarian women have helped? What about the case of Ayatollah Boroujerdi?*

Dr Ebadi: From the beginning, we decided that until we have one million signatures, we will not say how many we have...that is not our goal. In the past three or four months...people who are volunteering go door-to-door to teach women their rights before asking them for their signatures. The campaign seeped into the depth of Iranian society and culture...

The courts came hard on the campaign; so far over 50 volunteers have been summoned to courts...in different manners. Since the Iranian government is against women, they say something else: 'national security'. Those who are arrested had their cases taken by the centre of human rights advocates...the government issued sentences against people...we take it to the appeals court to revise the case. No measures are taken fully realizing the rights of man and women.

As for the case of *Boroujerdi* and the clergymen, it is part of special cases...I can't give you details because I cannot take part in it.

- What is the situation of religion and belief in Iran and the measures taken against activists for national security?

Dr Ebadi: Unfortunately, in our laws, we discriminate against religion, and the official religion is Shi'a. We recognize other Islamic sects...Judaism and Christianity are recognized but other beliefs (Baha'ism, Hinduism, Buddhism) are not recognized. There are widespread human rights violations of the Baha'i community in Iran...For example, they are denied rights to education and to university. Last year, we pressed the supreme legislative council to resume their education but they have no rights so far.

- *What can you say about the fallout from the arrest of Haleh Esfandiari?*

Dr Ebadi: I represented her...she spend four months in prison. I was denied visits and was not allowed several times from the premises where she was being held...and when all the doors closed, I was forced to send a report to the UN for an indiscriminate rapport...Luckily, Ms Haleh Esfandiari was released on bail and was able to leave Iran and join her family in the US

Whenever the trial is ready, it will give us access to the case, to read about it, and discuss the trial.

- *What are the issues related to minorities (in Iran) and what effect do they have on the wider situation?*

Dr Ebadi: When a fire starts in a home, it takes over the whole house...nobody benefits from wars and terrorism...There are minorities inside Iran...ethnic minorities (Kurds, Baluchis, Turkish-

speaking groups, Arabic-speaking groups). Their main demand is to be given permission to teach their own language in their schools...they should be allowed as in the Iranian constitution but the legal demand was ignored. This is part of the series of challenges between the government and the minority groups.

- Your devotion lies in many causes — what is it that you and your prestige can do to help Iranian refugees? What can be done to facilitate rights of citizenship?

Dr. Ebadi: One person alone can not solve the problem of the world...How can you expect me, just with the Nobel Prize, to resolve the problems of the world? If we want to think logically, why would they [Iranian refugees] be forced elsewhere? More human rights need to be observed in the country so as not to force them to leave. There needs to be more democracy...At the bare minimum, we are forced to vote for those already selected by the government and the slightest criticism is disapproved by the government. Even in the March parliamentary elections, many previously selected were disqualified...So if we had democracy at more advanced levels...there would be no reasons to leave Iran.

For the past three years, I have been defending human rights in Iran. I don't believe in any one group and I never said 'long live' anybody...I am simply a human rights advocate...I am only active in spreading democracy and human rights and believe me, thinking about Iranians abroad is more important than 'death to this regime or that regime.'