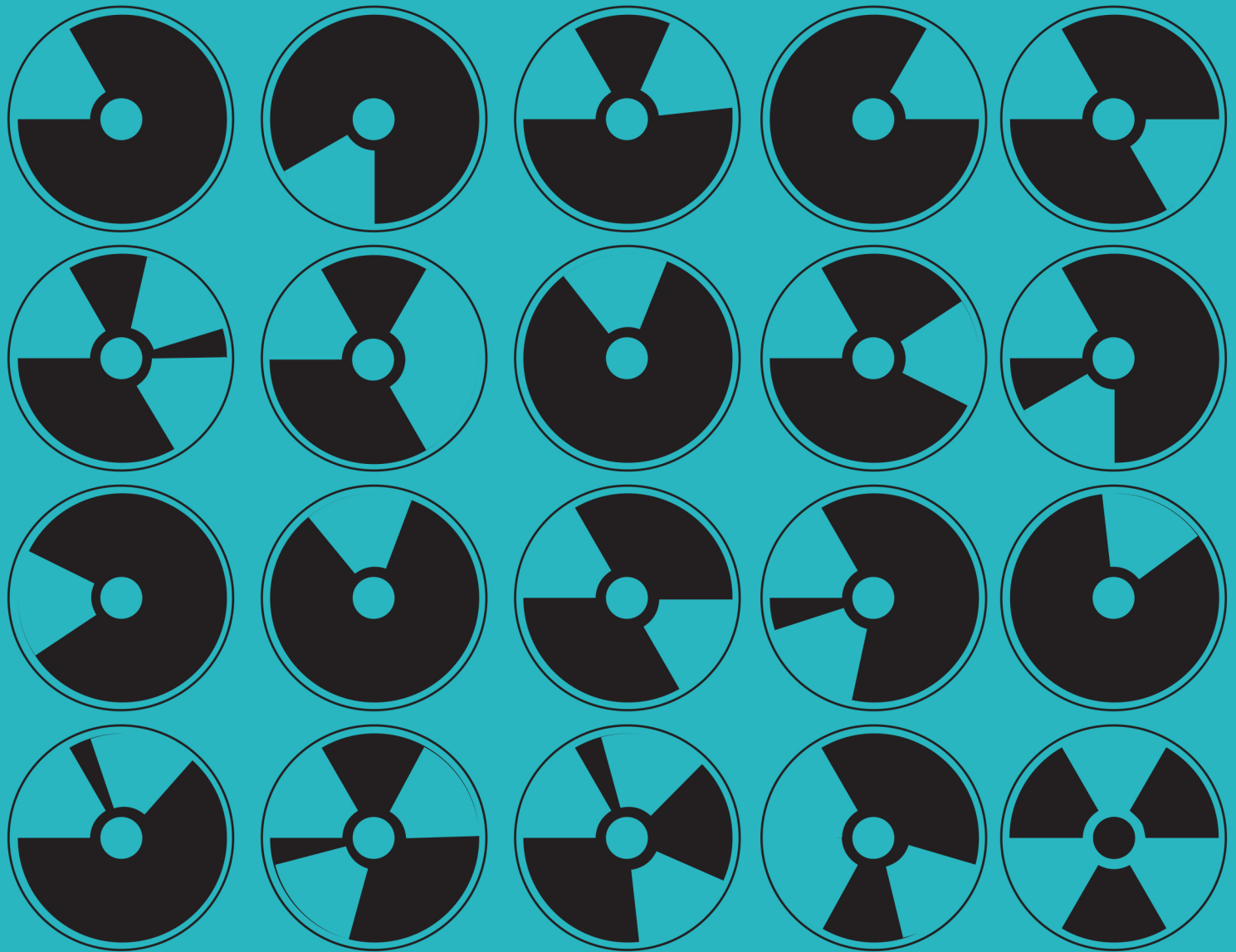


Voices from Iran:

Strong Support for the Nuclear Negotiations

A study on the views of leading figures in Iranian society on the P5 +1 talks

July 2014



Preface to the study

As this study demonstrates, leading Iranian civil society figures support the P5+1 nuclear negotiations and hope for a successful deal. No one can presume that such a deal will automatically lead to improvements in human rights and civil liberties in Iran. Yet the perpetuation of tensions over the nuclear file *is* likely to result in continued gross human rights violations. For the past decade, Iran's nuclear activities have been the focus of international attention and the human rights situation has only worsened. An end to the confrontation over the nuclear issue will allow the focus to turn to the state of human rights in Iran on the global stage.

The imperative for this is clear: human rights in Iran remain in a state of crisis. This situation has not improved since the election of Hassan Rouhani a year ago. Indeed, in many key areas it has worsened, as hardliners outside the executive branch wield their power in the intelligence, security, and judicial organs. The international community, particularly Europe and the United States, needs to prioritize human rights in their policy towards Iran.

Rouhani's government, with the blessing of Iran's Supreme Leader, has focused on rehabilitating the country's foreign relations and ending its international isolation. The nuclear negotiations represent just one aspect, though the most involved aspect, of this new engagement by Rouhani's government, which ultimately seeks Iran's full reintegration into the international community.

This presents an unprecedented opportunity to advance human rights in Iran: the international community must make it clear that Iran's full international rehabilitation is contingent upon an improvement in the country's human rights record. This is not to say that the outcome of the nuclear negotiations should be dependent upon human rights issues, but rather that the international community must link Iran's broader goal of fully ending its isolation to substantive improvement in its human rights record.

As this study shows, Iranians have voiced their support for both the nuclear negotiations and basic rights and freedoms. They should not stand alone in their struggle for human rights. Within the context of Iran's broader push to improve its foreign relations, the international community should urgently pursue human rights concerns alongside a successful nuclear agreement with Iran.

Hadi Ghaemi
Executive Director

In a recent study on the views of Iranian civil society regarding the P5+1 nuclear negotiations, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran found that leading Iranian figures were unanimous in their support for the ongoing nuclear negotiations. Influential members of Iranian society were united in their view that a negotiated settlement on the country's nuclear program is an unmitigated good to be pursued and supported.

Indeed, as the US and Iran work within the context of the P5+1 negotiations to forge an agreement on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, the two countries have the broad support of their respective populations.

Recent polls put **US support** for the negotiations at 2:1. Less publicized, but not surprising given the large electoral victory of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who campaigned on a platform of pursuing the talks, is that inside Iran, support for the nuclear negotiations among civil society is particularly strong.

While there were differences of opinion among the Campaign's sampling of Iranian civil society leaders regarding the subsequent effect of a nuclear agreement on the state of human rights—and broad agreement that the state of human rights in Iran must be improved—nevertheless, there was no disagreement on the imperative to proceed with the negotiations and a hoped for resolution of the nuclear conflict.

This unanimous support for the nuclear negotiations was forthcoming even among individuals who were former political prisoners. In other words, Iranian human rights victims were equally supportive of the negotiations.

In the study, the Campaign interviewed twenty-two leading civil society, political, and cultural figures inside Iran. The interviews were conducted in Persian, during June 2014. The interviewees included six lawyers, five prominent cultural figures (filmmakers, an arts patron, and literary figures), two journalists, four (reformist) political figures (including a vice president to former President Khatami and two former members of Parliament), several prominent academics, and leading Iranian political and economic analysts and commentators.

In an Appendix to this study, a list and description of the twenty-two respondents and extended excerpts from their statements are provided.

Support for the nuclear negotiations among this sampling of Iranian civil society was unanimous and unequivocal.

The interviewees were asked two questions:

- Do you support the P5+1 nuclear negotiations?
- If the negotiations are successful, what impact will this have on human rights and socio-political and cultural freedoms in Iran?

To the first question, all the respondents answered in the affirmative, without conditions. Support for the nuclear negotiations among this sampling of Iranian civil society was unanimous and unequivocal.

Typical comments regarding this support were:

“I am fully in agreement with the nuclear negotiations.” Giti Pourfazel, Human Rights Lawyer

“Of course I support the nuclear negotiations.”
Mohammad Ali Sepanlou, Prominent Poet

“It is obvious that we welcome peaceful relations with all countries and as such support the negotiations.”
Nasrin Sotoudeh, Human Rights Lawyer

Support for the nuclear negotiations was forthcoming not only among human rights victims and former political prisoners, but also among those who believed that the negotiations themselves might have no real effect on the state of human rights in the country. In other words, regardless of their expected impact on human rights, the negotiations were still supported.

More than half of the respondents stated that they thought a negotiated settlement would inexorably lead to an improvement of the human rights situation in Iran.

More than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) argued that a successful agreement that results in the lifting of sanctions would improve the economic lot of ordinary people, and once this occurred, the general public would, at the very least, be much more focused on the need for improvement in civil rights and liberties.

Many cited their belief that a successful agreement would open up more space for the discussion of human rights issues, once economic concerns were less pressing.

Typical comments echoing this sentiment were:

“If there is a successful nuclear negotiation, then the Iranian state will...be forced to be accountable to criticisms of its human rights and civil liberties policies.”

“If these negotiations reach a positive conclusion, we will definitely see more attention to human rights issues.” Masoud Shafie, Lawyer

“When the economy improves we will certainly see improvements in social and cultural freedoms.” Farideh Gheirat, Human Rights Lawyer

“I believe when people can feed themselves...then they will be more willing to pursue their demands from the government and the government will be more obligated to pay attention to these demands.” Mahmoud Dowlatbadi, Prominent Novelist

“If the sanctions are lifted, [and] people’s sense of insecurity from lack of money is lessened, [then] we will certainly have more space to focus on human rights and civil liberties.” Fakhrosadat Mohtashamipour, Reformist Politician

One respondent asserted that Western governments would also be more focused on the state of human rights in Iran after a successful agreement:

“If there is a successful nuclear negotiation, then the Iranian state will find itself in a position where it will be forced to be accountable to criticisms of its human rights and civil liberties policies. [Similarly], when Western concerns on the nuclear issue decrease, they will be more focused on such issues as human rights. This process will lead to improvement of democratic processes and human rights and liberties in Iran.” Issa Saharkhiz, Journalist

A number of those interviewed noted that a successful agreement would also empower President Rouhani, who has pledged to pursue civil liberties but has faced hardliners in Iran who control the intelligence, security, and judicial organs in Iran. They noted:

“The Rouhani government may become stronger following a successful negotiation, [and better able] to pursue the demands...of the Iranian people in the face of internal opposition.” Lili Golestan, Translator and Art Curator

Many cited their belief that a successful agreement would open up more space for the discussion of human rights issues, once economic concerns were less pressing.

“Rouhani has put all his efforts into [the nuclear] issue. After it reaches a positive conclusion, he will certainly have more ability to open society and confront his opponents more forcefully and fulfill the promises he made during his presidential campaign.” Davood Hermidas Bavand, Political Commentator

Five of the respondents asserted that there was no relationship between the nuclear agreement and the rights situation in the country. They believed the situation would either continue as is or even possibly worsen because Rouhani has neither the ability nor the willingness to improve things. Yet even these respondents, who rejected any beneficial impact on human rights, fully supported the negotiations.

Taken together, the Campaign’s study of leading civil society, political, and cultural figures inside Iran reflects strong support for the nuclear negotiations. Thus neither the state of human rights nor the views of Iranian civil society can be used as a tool to oppose the nuclear negotiations.

The Campaign urges the international community to pursue the improvement of human rights in Iran, but this should be done in tandem with full support for the nuclear negotiations. The results of this study show that Iranian civil society supports the simultaneous pursuit of human rights and a nuclear agreement.

Indeed, Rouhani’s clear mandate to end Iran’s international isolation provides a unique opportunity to advance human rights alongside a nuclear agreement, if it is linked to Iran’s global re-integration and rehabilitation. This is an opportunity that should not be lost.

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Appendix

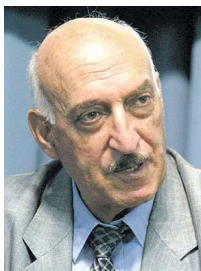
Excerpts from the Interviewees' Responses:

1. Ahmad Shirzad, former reformist Member of Parliament and Professor of Physics at Isfahan University



“I personally do not think the Rouhani government will have much impact on the human rights situation following the negotiations. I do think that if tensions between Iran and the global powers are reduced, it will have an indirect impact on the behavior of the Iranian state. On the other hand, people’s economic situation is extremely impotent. International experience on the international stage has shown that economic growth is directly related to the human rights situation. Once people’s economic situation improves, they will focus more on human rights and civil liberties.”

2. Davood Hermidas Bavand, political commentator and senior member of the (now banned) National Front political party



“Obviously I agree with the negotiations. Mr. Rouhani has put all his efforts into this issue. After it reaches a positive conclusion, he will certainly have more ability to open society and confront his opponents more forcefully and fulfill the promises he made during his presidential campaign. Once the negotiations are successfully concluded, we shall see how much Rouhani will stand by the promises he made to people during the campaign. Successful negotiations will lead to the lifting of sanctions and relative improvement in the economy, and then the society will demand a more open social and political environment. At this juncture, we are in a state of hope and expectancy. We hope that the negotiations will be fruitful.”

3. Fakhrosadat Mohtashamipour, reformist politician and wife of Mostafa Tajzadeh, who has been a political prisoner since 2009



“I fully support the nuclear negotiations and look forward to their fruitful conclusion. However, personally, I do not see a direct linkage between improvements in human rights and the nuclear negotiations. Yet they can be pursued simultaneously. At the present time, the Iranian people have made the economy their number one priority. So [if] sanctions are lifted, and people’s sense of insecurity from poverty and lack of money is lessened [then] definitely subsequently we will certainly have a better environment and more space to focus on human rights and civil liberties issues.”

4. Fariborz Raisdana, economist, activist, and political prisoner (2012-2013)



“I agree with a diplomatic solution because it will reduce tensions. Right now the security and economy of the country is in danger and we agree with a negotiated settlement. However, this perception, that after a successful nuclear negotiation there will be any change in the human rights or social and cultural civil liberties, is a wrong perception. Foreign governments are only interested in their economic interests; neither internal power centers nor foreign powers are interested in human rights or freedoms for Iranians.”

5. Farideh Gheirat, human rights lawyer



“As an Iranian I am fully in agreement with Rouhani’s approach to the negotiations up to now. I believe if we reach a negotiated settlement and sanctions are lifted, there will be less tension. When the economy improves we will certainly see improvements in social and cultural freedoms. Of course I hope that this will be the outcome.”

6. Ghassem Shooleh Saadi, former independent Member of Parliament and political prisoner (2011-2012)



“I agree with the negotiations. But I do not see a relationship between the nuclear negotiations and the human rights situation in Iran. Our economic problems are not related to our human rights problems, [such] that we would want to say or conclude that improvement in one domain will lead to improvements in other domains.”

7. Giti Pourfazel, human rights lawyer



“I am fully in agreement with the nuclear negotiations and I believe Rouhani has the correct approach towards them. If this trend continues, we shall regain what we have lost. I hope that as this government has called itself the government of moderation, following a successful resolution of the nuclear negotiations, it will create an environment of greater freedoms and the government will pay more attention to human right concerns.”

8. Issa Saharkhiz, journalist and political prisoner (2009-2014)



“I fully support the nuclear negotiations and am expecting a positive outcome. I believe it will have a widespread positive impact on the collective and individual lives of Iranians. I believe resolution of the nuclear file will promote human rights concerns to the number one priority and both domestic and international focus on these issues will increase. In my opinion, if there is a successful nuclear negotiation, then the Iranian state will find itself in a position where it will be forced to be accountable to criticisms of its human rights and civil liberties policies. [Similarly], when Western concerns on the nuclear issue decrease, naturally they will be more focused on such issues as human rights. This process will lead to improvement of democratic processes and human rights and liberties in Iran. In addition, we should note that resolution of the nuclear issue will lead to the lifting of sanctions and a decrease of economic pressures on people, and this will lead to an environment where the people will be more able to discuss their demands and the pursuit of them.”

9. Jila Baniyaghoub, journalist, women's rights activist, political prisoner (2012-2013), and wife of imprisoned (since 2009) journalist Bahman Ahmadi Amouie



"I am overall in agreement with the nuclear negotiations and I hope that [in tandem with] improving the economy, people's daily lives will also improve. Improving people's daily lives, by itself, is of great concern to me and for people like me. Yet, I do not believe success in these negotiations will necessarily mean improvements and openings in the political environment. It may very well be that when economic obstacles and crises are addressed the state's concerns will be lessened and it will have greater determination in closing the space for political and social activists."

10. Lili Golestan, translator and art curator



"I agree and support the negotiations. I do not see linkage between success in negotiations with improvements in social and cultural rights. I am not hopeful that success in the negotiations will lead to improvement in social and cultural rights. However, the Rouhani government may become stronger following a successful negotiation, to pursue the demands and aspirations of the Iranian people in the face of internal opposition. However, how successful this government will be in such a pursuit is not very clear. Overall, I am not very hopeful."

11. Mahmoud Alizadeh Tabatabaie, lawyer



"I am very optimistic about the nuclear negotiations and a successful conclusion. Certainly if negotiations are successful, the economy will improve and when this happens then the human rights situation will improve because it will get more attention and become a priority.... Foreign governments use human rights concerns instrumentally; Saudi Arabia is not subject to much pressure or criticism even though they do not enjoy the most basic freedoms. Human rights are never the driving force in determining other countries' policies toward us; as soon as they reach a successful nuclear negotiation, they won't pursue human rights concerns any more. However, we the Iranian people, when our economic lot improves following the negotiation, our human rights problems will also decrease."

12. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, prominent novelist and literary figure



“I hope that the nuclear negotiation will lead to peace and reconciliation. I hope after resolution of the nuclear crisis, our cultural situation and the environment of repression will also improve. I believe when people can feed themselves, and they feel a little bit better, then they will be more willing to pursue their demands from the government and the government will be more obligated to pay attention to these demands.”

13. Masoud Shafie, lawyer, effectively banned from practice for his work in several human rights cases



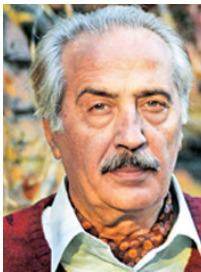
“Like the majority of Iranians I welcome the nuclear negotiations and I am expecting an agreement. If we reach an agreement between Iran and the P5+1, not only will the economic situation improve but it will also affect other domains such as cultural liberties, human rights, and other liberties.... All of our problems in the past 36 years [can be traced to] enmity with the US and considering [the US] an enemy. In Iran, many are awaiting the day when the authorities will say the US is not an enemy.... In my opinion, if these negotiations reach a positive conclusion, we will definitely see more attention to human rights issues.”

14. Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Mohammad Khatami’s Vice President (1997-2005) and political prisoner (2009)



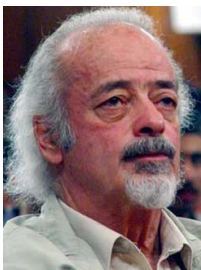
“I fully support the negotiations. However, achieving social and political rights and respect for human rights inside the country is completely dependent on domestic or internal decisions. The result of negotiations will not be decisive in this area. Also I do not believe the Rouhani government is a decisive factor in issues such as human rights and political-social rights. It is not only the Rouhani government; no administration is the deciding agent in this issue. Such decisions are taken elsewhere.”

15. Mohammad Ali Sepanlou, prominent poet



“Of course I support the nuclear negotiations, certainly if it’s successful, people’s daily economic life will improve and then they will seek changes in other realms, such as demanding civil liberties. And the government will be forced to address these demands.”

16. Mohammad Maleki, human rights activist, academic, the first president of Tehran University after the 1979 Revolution, and political prisoner (2009)



“I support the nuclear negotiations. However, I do not believe Mr. Rouhani can do anything about social liberties or improve the human rights situation following an agreement. One year of his presidency has passed and not only has the situation not improved, but the number of executions has increased, and [politically motivated] arrests are still continuing. Maybe I am a pessimist but that is how I see the situation. We should pay attention that if the nuclear negotiations conclude successfully, and the economy of Iran improves, the human rights violations, arrests, and persecutions continue or remain in place, then people will not be satisfied or content or happy. In my opinion, as long as people are not permitted to exercise their freedom of expression and opinion, then nothing significant will happen for the improvement of the human rights situation.”

17. Nasrin Sotoudeh, human rights lawyer, women’s rights activist, and political prisoner (2010-2013)



“It is obvious that we welcome peaceful relations with all countries and as such support the negotiations. However, if the Iranian state wants to rehabilitate its relations with the international community, it must certainly address fundamental human rights concerns on issues such as juvenile executions and freedom of expression. The Iranian government should clearly state its position on these issues during the nuclear negotiations. In my opinion, keeping silent on such issues until the end of negotiations will make it more difficult.”

My understanding is the European countries say we cannot easily bring up human rights issues because it will potentially threaten the negotiations. We say at a minimum ask the Iranian negotiators to express their position on fundamental human rights concerns such as juvenile executions which are banned by all international conventions.”

18. Sadegh Zibakalam, political scientist, prominent political commentator, recently sentenced to 18 months in prison for his writings criticizing Iran’s nuclear program



“I am 100% in agreement with the Geneva negotiations. I am of the belief that improvement in the relations between Iran and the West will at a minimum help to improve the human rights situation in Iran. If the Iranian government has more and better relations with the US and Europe, then Iranian officials will be forced to take the problems of civil society and freedom of expression and such liberties more seriously.”

19. Saeed Leylaz, Professor at Shahid Beheshti University, journalist, economics analyst, and political prisoner (2009-2013)



“I am fully in agreement with Iran’s nuclear negotiations with other countries. But if these negotiations achieve a successful result, what the impact inside the country will be is very complex. On the one hand, if the nuclear negotiations are fruitful, the government may, as a result, feel emboldened to deal with internal problems more harshly and with greater intolerance towards political forces. On the other hand, we know that political confrontation or conflict always takes place within social and economic contexts, and when tensions in these domains are lessened, the political domain will also improve. I believe Iranian society is in transition towards a less tense environment and in general we will move toward more stability and calm in economic and political domains. Of course I do not mean that we are necessarily reaching democracy, but more towards an environment with reduced tension.”

20. Saleh Nikbakht, lawyer



“I hope the negotiations will be fruitful. However, it is essential that there be accurate information about the content of the negotiations. We have no information inside Iran regarding the content and details of the negotiations and in the interest of freedom of information and expression there should be details regarding the content of the negotiations and any agreement provided to the people. In my opinion, success in the negotiations can impact significantly human rights developments inside Iran. No country can improve the human rights situation in isolation. It is essential that these improvements be achieved by the people inside Iran.”

21. Shahram Mokri, filmmaker



“I agree with the negotiations because I believe they are the surest and most appropriate [way] for ending the dispute [between the US and Iran]. I am currently an optimist and hopeful that the result of the negotiations will be positive for Iran. At the moment, the biggest challenge facing Rouhani’s government since taking office is to resolve the nuclear crisis, remove the sanctions, and reduce economic threats. In my opinion, if this government can be successful in these areas then it will be more empowered to focus on other issues such as the cultural environment in the country. If the negotiations are not successful then it will not be able to do much else such as improving the social and political and cultural domains.”

22. Tahmineh Milani, film director



“I hope the nuclear negotiations will be fruitful. If the Rouhani government continues the current trend we should certainly reach a fruitful resolution [to the negotiations], the sanctions will be lifted, and subsequently our human rights situation will also improve.”

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to the support of human rights in Iran.

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