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Do not Let Iran On The Human Rights Council

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As Tehran bids for a seat, what should U.N. members do?

While Iran's regime bloodies its dissidents, the nuclear weapons-loving mullahs are seeking a treat for themselves at the United Nations: Iran is running for a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council.

Utterly perverse though it would be, Iran might snag that prize. The 47 seats on the Geneva-based Human Rights Council are parceled out among regional groups of U.N. member states. This year the Asian bloc has four seats opening up. Five contenders have stepped forward: Malaysia, Maldives, Qatar, Thailand--and Iran. The winners will be chosen in May, by secret ballot of the 192-member U.N. General Assembly--a notoriously thug-friendly body, run this year by a former foreign minister of Libya.

The Human Rights Council is, in theory, the U.N.'s leading body dedicated to protecting human rights and condemning their abusers. If Iran's government wins a seat on this council, it would send a horrifying message to Iranian dissidents. They have been enduring mass arrests, beatings and murders in their quest for genuine human rights inside Iran.

This brand of U.N. legitimacy for Iran would compound the farce of U.N. sanctions, which have so far failed to stop Iran's nuclear ventures. It would be more evidence that President Barack Obama was mistaken when he claimed that Iran was becoming "more isolated."

It would also deal another blow to Obama's policy of "engagement." The current Human Rights Council is the product of U.N. "reform" four years ago, in which it replaced the old U.N. Commission on Human Rights--which grossly discredited itself with a membership stacked with dictatorships, and in 2003 chose a Libyan envoy as its chair. Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan promised the new council would usher in a new era of decency. The Bush administration, with John Bolton then serving as ambassador to the U.N., disagreed, saying there were not enough safeguards against tyrannies again hijacking the new council. The U.S. at the time declined to legitimize the new council by seeking a seat.

President Barack Obama reversed that in mid-2009. The U.S. became a member of the Human Rights Council, as part of Obama's push for greater U.S. involvement with the U.N. Obama's ambassador to the U.N., Susan Rice, explained at the time that the administration believed progress could better be made by "working from within." Rice also noted that in 2011, the Human Rights Council is scheduled to review its own procedures. The U.S. wants a seat at that table.

So, it seems, does Iran. Meanwhile U.S. membership on the council has done nothing to deter Iran's regime from beating and shooting protesters in the streets, as witnessed by the entire world since Iran's hotly disputed June 2009 presidential election. Even the U.N. General Assembly, prompted by Canada, managed to pass a resolution last October condemning Iran for torture, stoning, arrests and so forth.

But the U.N. Human Rights Council has yet to issue a single resolution condemning Iran, or appoint an investigator, or hold a single special session on Tehran's brutalities. At U.N. Watch, a nongovernmental watchdog in Geneva, executive director Hillel Neuer keeps a tally of activities at the council--where current membership already includes such abusers as Russia, China and Saudi Arabia. Neuer says that since the council was launched in mid-2006, it has issued 33 condemnatory resolutions. Of these, half a dozen have concerned Burma and North Korea. The other 27 have focused on condemning Israel, while absolving its attackers, including the Iranian-backed terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah.

As it happens, the council will have a chance Feb. 15 to ponder Iran's record in detail. The council rotates through reviews of individual countries, allocating three hours to each, at four year intervals. Iran's turn is scheduled for Monday.

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If the council members even bother to glance at some of the documents presented, they can hardly claim ignorance of the horrors inside Iran. Most telling is a 16-page report prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, summarizing the submissions of dozens of human rights groups and monitoring organizations--full of information richly supported by news reports, videos and other evidence seeping out of Iran.

The highlights include the use of torture, including severe beatings and rape, as a routine method for interrogating and punishing prisoners. Iran as of last November was described as having more than 1,600 juveniles on death row, for reasons that in some cases a free society would not deem criminal, such as homosexuality, apostasy or "acts incompatible with chastity."

The report cites the violent repression of protests following the election last June, including the killing of protesters in the streets and arrests of thousands more who have since been subject to the systematic brutalities of Iran's prisons, and in some cases executed. Iran discriminates brutally against minorities, hinders free speech and restricts travel. The penal code condones "amputation and flogging" for some offenses, and stoning for adultery.

Iran has submitted an Orwellian report of its own, claiming meticulous respect for human rights, as redefined by Tehran's lights--arguing that because "the system of government in Iran is based on principles of Islam, it is necessary that Islamic standards and criteria prevail in society." Clearly there are plenty of followers of Islam among the people of Iran who disagree with this interpretation of Islamic "standards." They have been risking their necks in the streets to say so. The Human Rights Council has done nothing so far to back them up.

Trailing its gruesome record, and brazenly defying U.N. sanctions on nuclear proliferation, Iran now hopes to slide into a seat on the Human Rights Council. Not that this would be Iran's only premium seat at the U.N. Having served out its term last year as head of the executive board of the U.N.'s flagship agency, the U.N. Development Program, Iran still holds one of the 36 seats on the UNDP's board. It also sits on the board of the World Food Program, Unicef, and last year became chair of the U.N.'s Vienna-based Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

What's Obama going to do about this? If the answer is nothing, we could be headed for an era in which a nuclear-armed Iranian regime, ruling by terror at home and spreading terror abroad, lands itself a seat alongside the U.S. as a U.N.-certified arbiter of human rights around the globe.