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Break the Silence on Iran

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Three decades ago, the Iranian revolution inspired generations of Arabs and infused in them a spirit of resistance to foreign intervention.

It came at a time when many Arabs had been disheartened by the 1979 Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt, and sparked hope in a regional power that could stand up to Israel.

Egypt's exit from the equation of the Israeli-Arab conflict was a blow to the Palestinian and Arab struggle to end Israeli occupation and achieve self-determination for the dispossessed Palestinian people.

But the "Islamic Revolution" transformed Iran from a gendarme for US interests in the region into an ally of Arab causes, thereby dramatically altering the Middle East landscape.

The historic reception Yasser Arafat, the late Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) chairman, received in Tehran in March 1979, signalled an end to the Iranian-Israeli pact and the beginning of Iran's role as a supporter of the Palestinian national liberation movement.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians turned out on the streets of Tehran to give a hero's welcome to Arafat who later inaugurated a Palestinian embassy in the building that had previously been the Israeli embassy.

Tainted image

Three decades later, Iran is still viewed as the only serious deterrent to Israeli power, but its image as an expression of people power has been marred by its backing of sectarian Iraqi Shia political parties and ruthless repression of Iranian opposition.

Its silence and inaction during the 2003 invasion of Iraq was tantamount to complicity that facilitated the US-led occupation of the country.



It was a position dictated more by its regional interests - asserting influence in Iraq - and vengeance for an eight-year war that was started by Baghdad in 1980.

Many Arabs see Iran's strong military as the only deterrent to Israel [AFP]

But its backing of Hezbollah during its liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation and during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon reinstated its status as a real and effective supporter of Arab resistance.

A majority of Arabs also admire Iran's refusal to compromise or negotiate on its right to develop nuclear power - in sharp contrast with weak and impotent Arab governments.

Muted Arab reactions

The current US and Israeli threats against Tehran only boost its status among the majority of Arabs and thus explain to a great extent the muted Arab reaction to the regime's harsh treatment of intellectuals and dissidents.

Very few columnists have been critical of Iran's human rights records and many Arab writers appear, or choose, to believe the Tehran's allegations that the imprisoned or even executed dissidents are cronies of - if not spies for - Western capitals.

The dilemma of many Arab intellectuals, and political activists, is that while many, especially secular writers, may be critical or even resent Iran's increasing theocracy, they are wary of being used - wittingly or unwittingly - to justify Israeli and American agendas against Iran.

This dilemma is not new. Most writers refrained from taking the government of Saddam Hussein, the late Iraqi president, to task over repression of the Iraqi people in the years leading up to the 1991 and 2003 wars.

Those who did, were frequently accused of pandering to Western agendas which used human rights issues to justify the bombardment, a cruel embargo and later the occupation of a key Arab country.

Legitimate grievances

But silence over human rights abuse in Iran is also problematic - especially for those of us who claim commitment to universal values and are relatively aware of the Iranian political landscape and the nature of the ongoing political struggle.

Yes, there may be supporters for the reformists in Iran who may be associated with the West. It is also possible that the West, especially Washington, may be interfering and manipulating some of the protests.

But the fact remains that the opposition has legitimate grievances and that some of the best sons and daughters of the Iranian revolution - that inspired millions of Arabs - are being persecuted.

The late Great Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri was the most important example of how the regime managed to punish and isolate those who challenged the increasing consolidation of power in the hands of the supreme leader.

Montazeri, who was then the most important living expert on the concept of Velayat-el- Faqih, rule by jurisprudence, did not provide absolute power to the Supreme Leader.

"One who acts on God's behalf is not a dictator," Montazeri reportedly argued during the constitutional debate in 1986. Montazeri was arrested and humiliated but he refused to be silenced and was placed under house arrest between 1997 and 2003.

While in Tehran in the 1990s, I met many of his students and followers - or at least those influenced by him - some of whom later became prominent leaders or voices of the reformist movement.

The revolution's failures

Shams O-Vaezen, who was a journalist back then, later became a familiar face to Arab audiences, appearing frequently on Al Jazeera especially since the recent wave of protests triggered by opposition reservations about the Iranian presidential elections.



Tehran has been accused of a brutal crackdown on protesters since the June elections [AFP]

While obviously espousing a reformist agenda, Vaezen, who speaks fluent Arabic, eloquently exposed the failure of the regime without falling into the trap of pandering to the US-Israeli led campaign against his country.

His imprisonment in Evin prison - and later release in 2003 - for demanding freedom of speech pained him but did not stop him from believing in the main goals of the revolution he joined when he was only 19.

Vaezen, like many Iranians I met and have been following since, has himself been deeply affected by the Palestinian struggle. Like many young leading participants of the Iranian revolution, Vaezen was particularly inspired by the PLO, which was then involved in training and supporting the first cadres of the Shah's opponents.

When the Iranian leadership shifted its support from Fatah and the PLO to Hamas, it nevertheless continued its backing for Palestinian national rights - something it shared with reformists like Vaezen.

Enemies of the state

A few weeks ago, however, Shams was arrested - an event reported by Al Jazeera - and became one of many detainees collectively branded as "enemies of the revolution".

He has neither been released nor indicted. But like many of his Arab friends, I fear the day when he is formally accused of charges that could slander his lifelong struggle, let alone lead to his execution.

A Lebanese friend of Shams's recently told me that families of the detainees have complained to him of their dismay and sadness over the silence of Arab writers.

With few exceptions, most Arab and leftist columnists in the West have been exclusively focused on debunking Western and Israeli arguments for war against Iran - ignoring reports of the arrests, torture and execution of dissidents or critics in the Islamic Republic.

This has left the reporting and commentary wide open for pro-Western government columnists and news outlets to control the spin and expropriate the agenda of the reformists in the service of the gathering campaign for war against Iran.

On the anniversary of the Iranian revolution, it is time for Arab and progressive writers as they rightly oppose the calls for war on Iran to break the silence on the state's abuse of human rights and harassment and repression of the opposition.

Just as the Western governments cannot cynically exploit the opposition to justify their aggressive measures against Iran we cannot allow our commitment to Palestine, and what we view as just causes to silence us against abuse of the Iranian people.

