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ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY IN ACTION: IRAN'S REACTION TO THE RIOTS IN WESTREN CHINA

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In July, Marwa al-Sherbini, a young Muslim woman of Egyptian origin was murdered by a German in a Dresden courthouse, prompting a swift and strong diplomatic response from Iranian officials. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the German Ambassador to Tehran to a meeting, and the Foreign Ministry's spokesman condemned the incident, asserting that it revealed the depth of insecurity and hatred the immigrants and religious minorities were facing in Germany. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also reacted to the affair and held the German government responsible for the murder. He also slammed the West for its double standards over human rights and demanded the United Nations Security Council convene and condemn Germany.

The Iranian authorities' strong reaction following the death of the Muslim woman in Germany was in stark contrast to their silence following the clashes which broke out in early July between Chinese authorities and the Uighurs, a Muslim minority in western China. The unrest in the Xinjiang province followed allegations made by the Muslim population over discrimination and left more than 150 people dead.

The riots in China have presented the Iranian authorities with a difficult dilemma. Since the Islamic revolution Iran declared its extensive commitment to Islamic solidarity and its support

for Muslims around the world. In the case of China's latest crackdown on the Uighurs, however, this commitment could have jeopardized its vital national interests. Iran and China maintain strategic and widespread relations concerning diverse issues, including energy, commerce, communication and transportation.

China has become one of Iran's most important commercial partners over the last few years. Iran also requires Chinese political support in the Security Council in order to avoid increased international sanctions on its nuclear program. In the eyes of Iranian officials, public Iranian support for the Muslim demonstrators in China could have endangered the close relations between the two countries.

The timing of the riots in China has intensified the dilemma facing Iran. The unrest in China broke out only weeks after Iranian regime had suppressed the post-election protest in Iran. The resemblance between the suppression of the riots in Iran and China did not go unnoticed by the Iranian government's internal critics. It was reflected, for instance, in an article published a few days after the riots in China by Ma'sumeh Ebtekar, former Iranian vice-president and a senior reformist political figure. In her article, titled: "The Muslims in China and the velvet revolution", Ebtekar criticized the Iranian authorities for their silence over the

suppression of the Muslims in China and elaborated on the measures taken by the Chinese authorities to crush the riots, implicitly referring to the resemblance between these measures and those taken by Iranian regime against Iranian demonstrators last June (*Saham News*: July 11, 2009).

The similarities between the crackdowns on demonstrators in Iran and the Uighurs in China may have compelled the Iranian authorities to exercise caution in their public response to the riots in China. The Iranian media waited a full week after the riots before reporting a phone call held between the Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki and his Chinese counterpart concerning the developments in western China.

According to these reports, Motakki expressed the concerns of Muslim states over the killings of Muslim civilians in China. He stressed, however, the need for preserving national unity in China and said that any foreign interference meant to destabilize China was unacceptable (*IRNA*, July 13). Not only did the Iranian authorities refrain from denouncing the suppression of the riots in China, but supporters of the government even expressed their consent with Chinese official policy and blamed the United States for inciting the riots in the country.

The official Iranian news agency, *IRNA*, for example, claimed that the Muslim demonstrators in China were incited by the United States, which was looking to carry out a "velvet revolution" in China in order to deal with China's growing economic clout. *IRNA* even slammed western media for exaggerating the reports concerning the intensity of the riots (*'Asr-e Iran*: July 11, 2009). The ultra-conservative website *Raja News* also claimed that the United States stands behind the events in China in a direct continuation of the efforts made by western governments last year to incite the citizens in Tibet against the Chinese regime on the eve of the Olympic Games (*Raja News*: July 12, 2009).

It should be noted that during the June riots in Iran, the government's supporters blamed the demonstrators for cooperating with western governments in their attempt to carry out "velvet revolution" in Iran.

A similar claim was also made by Hamid Reza Taraqi, a senior member of the conservative "Islamic Coalition" party and one of the supporters of the government. Referring to the developments in China, he said that the American involvement in the events was obvious and that it reflected the American response to Chinese support for Iran regarding its nuclear program. The events in China, Taraqi claimed, concerned ethnic and not religious motives and those who used religion in their demonstrations had other aims. He said that there is no evidence to support the claim of discrimination against Muslims by the Chinese authorities, and that during his visit to China he saw no expression of any limitations imposed on the Muslims. Those who try to present the events in China using "Islamic colors", he said, are only trying to jeopardize the relations between China and the Muslim countries, including Iran (*'Asr-e Iran*: July 13, 2009).

The reaction of the Iranian authorities and the government's supporters to the events in China did not, however, reflect the reaction of all Iranians to the Chinese crisis. The relative indifference of the government to the suppression of the riots in China stands in contrast to the harsh criticism from senior Iranian clerics and the media.

The news website *'Asr-e Iran*, associated with pragmatic conservative elements, for example, condemned the Chinese government for its continued discrimination against the Muslim minority in China and for its anti-Islamic policy of oppression (*'Asr-e Iran*: July 7, 2009). The *Tabnak* website stated that the Iranian government's reaction to the events in China reflected double standards over the repression of Muslims in China and in Palestine. *Tabnak* questioned whether the relations between Iran and Communist China were more important than the murder of Chinese Muslims (*Tabnak*: July 10, 2009).

The conservative daily *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, also criticized Iranian officials' silence regarding the Chinese repression. In an editorial entitled: "The Xinjiang Events and our Responsibility", the Iranian daily stated that the governmental policy towards the events in China and the official media's disregarding these

events contradict Iran's commitment to defend the rights of the Muslims in the world, which is anchored in the Iranian constitution. *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* questioned the Iranian indifference towards the Chinese developments saying that a revolutionary Islamic state should have been expected to act differently. Even if political considerations prevent the Iranian government from taking a clear stance regarding the events, the daily asserted, the interests of the Islamic nation and the preservation of Iran's position are far too important to justify such indifference regarding the situation in China (*Jomhuri-ye Eslami*: July 11, 2009).

The media's criticism over Iranian official indifference was soon followed by harsh reactions from senior clerics, led by two conservative clerics: Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem-Shirazi and Grand Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani, and by the reformist cleric, Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Sane'i. In a public statement released by Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi, the high-ranking cleric denounced the oppression of Muslims in China and stated that despite the close friendly economic and political relations between Iran and China, Iran could not remain silent over the violent oppression of the Muslims in China. The Iranian nation, he stated, expects its government to take a stronger stance regarding the events in China and not to leave its Muslim brothers and sisters on their own (*ILNA*: July 12, 2009).

The preference given to state political interests over ideological ideals by the Iranian regime is not a new phenomenon. Iran avoided, for example, any assistance or even expression of support for the Chechen Muslims, who had been struggling for independence from Moscow throughout the 1990s. It also adopted a balanced approach toward Shi'ite Muslim

Azerbaijan and Christian Armenia ever since the 1988 eruption of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and even served as Armenia's main supply route, thus helping the Armenian war effort in its conflict against Azerbaijan. The tension between political interests and revolutionary vision was also reflected in Iran's reaction to the political crisis in Kosovo (*Iran Spotlight* 1: March 2008).

Following the recent developments in China, the conservative website *Alef* referred to this tension between state interests and ideological principles in Iranian foreign policy. An article published by Mohammad Hussein Akbari asserted that even Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, expressed the preference that should be given to state interests in foreign policy in a speech he made in 2003. Talking to Iranian students the Supreme Leader claimed that there is nothing wrong with the government establishing its relations with foreign countries on the basis of national interests and that national policy could not be totally based upon principles. According to Akbari, a distinction should be made between the stance of the government, which is required to act in accordance with national interests, and the stance taken by non-governmental organizations, which are not obliged to state interests and can therefore act with more consideration for given to values and ideological perceptions (*Alef*: July 12, 2009).

Iran's restrained reaction to the events in China does not indicate that Iran has deserted its revolutionary principles. It does demonstrate once again, however, that the Iranian foreign policy combines political state interests and ideological principles. Whenever the Iranian regime feels that its revolutionary vision could compromise its vital national interests, it is likely to act in accordance with pragmatic considerations■

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