



## EU-Iran Dialogue for Promotion of Human Rights in Iran

After a long period of ambivalence and misunderstanding, Iran and European Union has started new attempts to open venues for dialogue on Human Rights issues. Islamic Republic of Iran has shown its deep interests for closer interactions with the European countries. Meanwhile, European Union has tried to bridge new ties with Iran in various fields of economic, trade, and political relations. In such an atmosphere, some NGOs and human rights activists are optimistic advocates of human rights dialogues between the two parties, while some are suspicious about any sort of interactions with the Iranian government.

As part of its human rights attempts, European Parliament has opened the floor to Iranian NGOs to reflect their opinion on the EU-Iran human rights future interactions. The “workshop on human rights in Iran after the nuclear deal: business as usual or time for change?” was held by the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) and the Delegation for Relations with Iran (D-IR) on Tuesday, 24, January 2017. The workshop was hosted by two members of the European Parliament: Mr. Janusz Lewandowski, chair of the Delegation for relations with Iran, and Ms. Elena Valenciano, from the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Human Rights. Various Iranian NGOs have expressed their opinion on the necessity of reform and improvement of the situation of human rights in Iran. However, the Iran-based human rights NGOs and activists were absent in the event. As the only Iran-based human rights NGO, Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) emphasized on the necessity of continuous reforms in the situation of human rights in Iran and the important role of Iran-EU dialogue in this process.

Iranian NGOs welcomed the European Unions’ attempts for starting a new round of talks with Islamic Republic of Iran on Human Rights Issues. About three decades of humanitarian activities in Iran and the Middle East taught them that any changes in the human rights situation in the developing countries require mutual interactions with the state officials and empowerment of civil society organizations and NGOs. Human rights activists can find new opportunities for their business through active engagement of international bodies in improvement of human rights issues. Iran-based NGOs, active in the field of human rights, should always worry about the decisions of international organizations and the way they would affect the atmosphere of their humanitarian endeavors. The very fresh experiences of Iranian activists include their serious problems in accessing vital medications and medical assistances for some of the clients in urgent need for medical support during the international sanctions against Iran in the recent years. Despite its probable political achievements, the sanction mechanism destroyed the economy and worsened the human rights situation, which is emphasized repeatedly in various United Nations’ reports such as the report of the Special Rapporteur on “human rights and international sanctions”, Idriss Jazairy (14 July 2015) and the report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (10 July 2014). The adverse position of the international community towards Iran and the economic and social side effects, put NGOs under pressure by denigrating them in the eyes of the Iranian society and denouncing them as the beholders of ‘western values’. Before making any decision in the EU headquarters, it is necessary for the decision makers to ask

themselves how any given decision will affect the activities of Iran based NGOs and the civil society directly or indirectly. Such considerations will necessitate wider integration of Iran based NGOs, along with international NGOs, in the process of decision making in the European Parliament.

Iranian activists invite the European Parliament to benefit from the existing atmosphere and start a smooth and steady interaction and negotiation with the Iranian officials on human rights situation in Iran. After a decade of mistrust between Iran and the EU, the successful experience of the Iran Nuclear Deal has changed the climate between the two parties. The bilateral positive perspective should be used by the EU in order to improve the human rights situation. The history showed us that other alternatives such as blind pressure, political confrontations or sanctions not only did not result in change of human rights condition in Iran but also worsened the circumstances for the human rights activists of the country.

Many years of humanitarian and socio-political activities equipped Iranian NGOs with necessary tools and methods of integration in the Iranian society. They have learned to make big changes and pursue their mission and goals through continuous negotiation with decision makers and constitutional bodies. Many of their suggestions were incorporated in the last amendment of the Iranian Penal Code introduced in May 2013. They were able to work collectively with each other in lobbying various officials in the executive and legislative sections. Many of their comments on the Charter of Citizenship were incorporated in the last version of the text. In the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), they insisted on the necessity for establishing a National Human Rights Institution in Iran. After months of lobbying, the bill for establishing Iranian National Human Rights Institution has been prepared by the cabinet of President Hassan Rouhani and it is getting into its final stage. In various cases of murder, they

could delay or withdraw the execution sentences by seeking forgiveness of the “heirs of the blood”, or retrial of the accused according to Article 91 of the new Penal Code. They made huge changes, but they still have a long way to go to reach their ideals and targets.

European Union should also expand its activities beyond the Iranian policy makers and officials, and invests its financial supports in training and empowerment of the Iran based NGOs. Most of the community groups and minority group NGOs even do not have the basic knowledge on the possible mechanisms for obtaining their preliminary legal rights - let alone fighting for improving their human rights standard. Lack of funding has always been a major obstacle for Iran-based NGOs and activists in their projects. A mutual agreement with the Iranian officials can pave the way for the European Union to channel financial support to the human rights organizations and NGOs in Iran. Such initiatives will prepare a better atmosphere for Iranian civil society to play its effective role for promotion of human rights in Iran.

After several decades of working in the Iranian society, Iranian NGOs and human rights activists have learnt the language and the necessary skills for interaction with the country's policy-making organizations. Most of the Iran-based NGOs could bridge synergic relations with various governmental and international bodies through continued dialogue and constructive communications. They have learned that Iranian government, like any other political system, has its own internal rules of the game which should be learnt, respected, and reformed gradually and continuously. The experience can be copied by the international bodies and European Union. Only by mutual respect, continuous interactions, and gradual reformation, the European Union can help the promotion of the human rights standards and contribute to the endeavors of the Iranian NGOs.