

FROM PARIS TO COLOGNE: IN PURSUIT OF A STRUGGLE THAT IRANIANS MUST WIN

FORWARD

Forty Five years after the establishment of an autocratic religious government in Iran, despite having lost much of its original support base and popularity over the years, the Iranian political scene continues to lack a credible political entity capable of promoting fundamental change in the country.

This is at a time, especially in recent years, when people have tried to use every means available to express their hatred of the status quo while paying a heavy price for their protests on each occasion. The latest in a series of such episodes was the widespread and protracted “*Women, Life, Freedom*” protests of 2022-2023 that was triggered by the brutal killing of Mahsa Amini. Although brutally crushed, the ‘Mahsa movement’, has nonetheless, earned itself a special place in the contemporary history of the struggles of the Iranian people, having resonated both domestically and globally, in underlining the Iranian nation’s resolute search for dignity, freedom and justice.

However, despite all the unquestionable sacrifices that drew the attention of the world at large to the level of opposition and hatred felt by the Iranian people towards the Islamic regime and its leader, the blood-stained theocracy ruthlessly suppressed this movement by killing more than 500 people, blinding some 2000 others and arresting more than 22,000 protesters.

It is thus clear that attaining the desired outcome sought by freedom-loving people in Iran cannot be achieved by waving a magic wand. Hence, it is essential, taking account of the historical experiences of others, to select the most suitable path for the attainment of their objectives. Such an approach requires wisdom, patience and most importantly, a careful pursuit of novel and ‘doable’ solutions. Only then, can a serious challenge to the ruling establishment in Iran be mounted in such a way that it can never again rely on repression and violence to silence and ignore the legitimate demands of the Iranian nation.

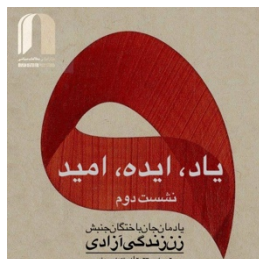
Based on these considerations, in the course of the past 12 months, the Paris based "Iranian Center for Political Studies" (ICPS), in cooperation with several influential and authoritative Iranian academic and political personalities, organized two working seminars in Paris. The first examined existing realities and practical options for continuing the national struggle. The second seminar focused on an in-depth examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement.



The achievements of the two seminars in Paris then became the basis for a series of four other gatherings entitled "Memories, Ideas, Hopes" that were subsequently held in the cities of The Hague (Netherlands), Stockholm (Sweden), Vienna (Austria) and finally Cologne (Germany), with the participation of many well regarded, qualified and most importantly, dedicated Iranian scholars and political

activists.

In addition to honouring the fallen martyrs of the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement – a feat that could not have happened inside Iran due to undue restrictions imposed on all the grieving families by the Islamic regime - the overriding objective of these gatherings was the injection of new ideals along with the infusion of new hopes for the struggles that lie ahead.



FROM PARIS TO COLOGNE : DISCUSSION OF THE ISSUES

As previously mentioned, the two meetings held in Paris were a prelude to the four separate meetings that were subsequently held in the four European cities of The Hague, Stockholm, Vienna and Cologne. It was the view of the organizers that the first step in any kind of an effective

struggle towards the attainment of a democratic order in Iran, should now focus entirely on realistic and practical policies and actions. Towards this end, the following points were specially highlighted:

1. One of the key difficulties among the exiled opposition groups and figures in various efforts to create an alternative over the past four decades has been their 'short-term approach' in seeking ways to overthrow the regime. – efforts that could not succeed and would gradually fade.
2. In any process leading to the formation of an alternative, it is usually movements that give birth to alternatives and not the other way around. One of the main difficulties in building leadership councils or such alternatives outside Iran has generally been the absence of credible political movements playing a lead role for the creation of a credible alternative, the reverse usually being the case – oblivious of the consideration that it is not children who produce parents not the other way around.

3. Amongst all shades of political action groups – from monarchists and republicans to federalists and nationalists etc., there have always been sectors with extremist and monopolistic tendencies. However, at the same time, there are also moderate segments who are open minded and have a pluralistic outlook. It is apparent that it is amongst such groups that one needs to focus in the search for any potential alternatives, especially inside the country (including amongst the political prisoner population).
4. When debates turn to a discussion of alternatives and methods of organisation, deliberations should not be limited to events and views outside Iran. On the contrary, they should focus on inside Iran. Inside the country, there are a whole host of groups and entities in civil and political society as well as trade unions. Naturally, all these domestic entities can all be supported by Iranians abroad.
5. While there are many shared views in the ongoing discourse for a desirable alternative (e.g., on subjects such as secularism, parliamentary democracy, social coexistence, elimination of discrimination [class, sexual, ethnic,, religious and linguistic], pursuit of a foreign policy based on the national interest, federalism, economic programmes, etc.) , nonetheless, we are some way away from the kind of consensus that is needed on these issues.
6. The Islamic Republic (i.e., the ‘Deep State’) still enjoys the support of certain loyal and decisively effective elements. This raises the question as to how can the disaffected majority overcome the governing minority? What is needed to address this serious requirement in the first instance [unlike previous efforts of trying to forge a coalition from the top in the absence of any active political blocks on the ground] is the establishment of a multitude of small networks with many branches throughout Iran – something that is currently in the process of taking shape.



**SUMMARY POINTS OF MEETINGS ENTITLED
“REMEMBRANCE, IDEAS, HOPES”**

For the people of Iran, with the exception of war, the pursuit of all other options is seen as being less dangerous and harmful than the continued Islamic rule. However, in order to analyse Iran’s political circumstances, it is useful bearing in mind a ‘square framework’ in which the sides represent ‘the people’, ‘government’, ‘political, civil and non-governmental forces (civil society)’ and finally, ‘global dimensions’. Given that each of the afore mentioned factors are fluid and adjusting constantly, it would be unrealistic to consider the future as fixed with only one way to move ahead. Therefore, the key point is that those who approach Iran’s problems with a one-track mind are blinded to the multi-faceted shape of Iranian society and politics, especially since opposing forces are constantly in motion and a successful political approach needs to recognise and accept this reality.

We in Iran have always faced forces and movements who believed they represented the majority. At times in the past, the clerics, the Mojahedin, the Reformists and now some supporters of monarchy have been of such a persuasion. Those who believe they represent the majority are by definition exclusionists. Moreover, they fail to learn the repeated lesson of history that everyone generally falls into the minority category at one stage or another and as such needs to work with other bodies. Indeed, this has for long been the norm in democratic societies which are governed by coalitions representing a wide variety of political parties.

Acceptance of the fundamental rights of those who may not be 'one of us' is an indispensable starting point for the attainment of political maturity. In order to achieve this principled and historic objective, our society must set aside extremist and exclusionary notions which ultimately lead to further separation, chaos and instability. Thus, it is essential to nurture dialogue and encourage moderation rather than the pursuit of extremist behaviour among groups and sections of society. Those who are resorting to populist tactics in the hope of prevailing and monopolizing power at the expense of others are part of the problem and most definitely, not part of the solution.



ALIGNING FORCES AROUND A 'COMMON DEMAND'

A strategic necessity of practical politics in Iran at this time is the need for a common language and practical alignment of all forces centred around a common demand: "*Replacing theocratic dictatorship ('Guardianship of the Clergy') with a political system based on popular sovereignty.*"

It should at no time be forgotten that the main impetus behind any change must come from inside Iran and by the same token it is also not just prudent but imperative not to forget that despite all the glorification of the Mahsa movement in international circles, most foreign governments, oblivious of their own condemnations of the Islamic authorities for their brutal behaviour, ultimately continued their engagements with the regime.

In the course of global conflicts, we have seen socialists and capitalists come together in the fight against fascism, just as parties from the left and right in various elections in the West have resorted to joint political action and in effect cooperated against right-wing extremists. In Iran, civil society, political movements and civil disobedience constitute the main pillars for the struggle ahead. Their progress as they move forward can be positively assisted by further fall outs from the regime and support from the international community.

Thus, dialogue and alignment of moderate forces in Iran is an urgent strategic necessity for two reasons:

- 1. "Consolidation" of forces in order to transit from dictatorship and violent religious tyranny to a conducive atmosphere for the practice of "pluralism" and the formation of a working democratic order.
- 2. The stark reality that in the event of any future transition to a progressive and democratic government, all national capacities (i.e., without any exclusions) need to be directed at rebuilding Iran and improving the lives of its people.

Based on such a belief, our message directed at those currently ensconced in the heart of the ruling establishment should be one that says, "you are late in joining us, but welcome nonetheless" and not one that says, "why have you come and where were you before?"!

In the latter case, all of us seeking change will continue to remain fragmented in face of a united front that is against us. Such an outlook is much like the kind of harmful behaviour that was exhibited by the 'Islamic Republican Party' against all intellectual and political forces in the immediate aftermath of the revolution.

Any organization, management or leadership needs to have an open and inclusive policy with regards to the participation of all political organizations, civil institutions and trade unions and not just one or some of them and without the proviso that the political component is takes precedence the others.

It is sometime now that discourse on the subject of 'change' in Iran has gone well beyond the two options of 'reform' or 'revolution'. Today, there is now a third option that seeks transition for change through 'evolution' (or 'national reconciliation').

Reformists had in the past sought to preserve and reform the existing regime through elections, while those wishing to overthrow the regime sought to achieve the outcome they desired in the streets. Those seeking 'transitional change through national reconciliation' want the regime to 'capitulate'. While the attainment of this goal may have had its origins in the streets, it does not need to end there. The eventual turn of events in countries like South Africa, Poland, Chile and Portugal etc., was neither revolutionary nor reformist, and this type of evolutionary transition has usually had greater success in reaching a more stable and lasting democracy.

The notion of one person one vote associated with parliamentary democracy though necessary is not sufficient. The experience before and after the Islamic revolution has shown that the direct presence of people from different regions in centres of power allows for a better distribution of resources to those

regions. For a stable future Iran, it is essential that such a presence should be legalized and systematized.

This requires that there should be serious discussions about issues such as power distribution mechanisms that entails the consideration of similar global experiences for reaching a solution that is suitable for our country – i.e., using important historical experiences to address problems associated with a centralized system and alleged religious, ethnic, linguistic, etc. discriminations.

When we enter a marathon with a mentality for running a hundred meters race, there is a tendency to become disappointed after a few hundred meters well before reaching the end point. But being prepared for a marathon, having covered the first thousand meters, only encourages one to positively and energetically try and finish the race.

Thus, by taking note of history and the course of political events in recent years, it can clearly be seen that significant progress has been achieved, even under situations of extreme duress even amongst those incarcerated in the dark prison cells of the Islamic Republic!

In conclusion, it is only prudent bearing in mind that with short-term and narrow-minded visions, the young generation of today who participate in street protests both inside or outside the country, will only be left with feelings of dejection and defeat in the absence of any clear results. But, bearing in mind the lessons learned, some of those young activists of yesteryear, having shrugged their disappointments aside, remain fully committed to their ideals and are today the main impetus and flag bearers of this important struggle for the future of our nation that must continue until final victory has been achieved.

