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## PERSPECTIVE/ INTERNATIONAL

# Debating Iran

BY SCOTT LONG

Is there a battle over Iran? In Washington and London, yes. Nations with immense military machines at their disposal argue the merits of peace and war.

So why do the differences of a few lesbian and gay activists in New York matter? Because lesbian and gay Iranians are not abstractions, sheltered from politics—or missiles. Their lives should not be reduced to the agendas of well-meaning strangers in the West.

For eight months, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has researched a report on abuses based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Iran, interviewing dozens in Iran and the diaspora, trying to separate fact from rhetoric and rumor. As a prominent Iranian dissident said last week, “We need cases!”—documentation, not speculation.

Iran is a surveillance society. Homes are raided, phones tapped, people who look or act differently, detained. Privacy is under siege. So is dignity: anyone arrested may be tortured.

Iran is a patriarchal society. Families police women’s sexualities: those who don’t conform face violence and fear.

Iran executes more people than almost any other country in the world. Consensual homosexual conduct carries the death penalty.

Yet if there is change, it will start inside Iran. Our report won’t be aimed at audiences in San Francisco or London. The readers that matter most are Iranian lesbians and gays, who are trying to assess their risks and options, and Iranian human rights workers campaigning for basic freedoms. That’s consistent with HRW’s years of work on Iran, supporting civil society from bloggers to student dissidents. We want to frame the issues not in terms of “gay rights” but as struggles for privacy, women’s rights, and an end to executions. In the process we hope to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Iranian asylum-seekers with reliable facts.

Reliability matters.

When pictures of two young men hanged in the Iranian city of Mashhad circulated in July 2005, revulsion rode with them around the world. Many felt an intense bond with the blindfolded, helpless victims. The photos brought home the death penalty’s horror.

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Yet if a picture is worth a thousand words, it should not substitute for them. The initial story of a “gay killing” grew complicated; the actual charges against the boys involved an alleged sexual assault on a 13-year-old. Complications and slogans sit uneasily together.

Doug Ireland began a campaign in Gay City News to prove that the Mashhad case was one of consensual homosexual sex, and that the Ahmadinejad regime was carrying out a “massive pogrom,” an “intensifying crackdown.” His reporting was deeply irresponsible. His claims about Mashhad relied entirely on second-hand sources. Ireland never confirmed those reports. No one has. His main source hasn’t shared information directly, even with the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization. Ireland proclaimed the rape charges “refuted.”

A few Iranian exile groups saw a new audience in Western gays. They began reporting multiple executions in Iran as gay-related. Ireland was one of many drawn into Iranian exile politics with little feel for its complexities. And he leapt ahead even of his secondhand sources—for instance, suggesting a rape trial in Arak was a trial for consensual homosexual sex even though voices within Iran clearly doubted it.

After four men were hanged for unspecified “sexual offenses” in Iran, Ireland found verbal similarity in the reporting enough to “strongly suggest” that they were hanged for homosexuality. The men were hanged for heterosexual rape—two for the rape of girls aged 8 and 10. When I made this clear to Ireland, he never qualified his earlier claim.

Most disturbingly, when an exile group told Ireland it had hired a Tehran attorney, Ireland published his name. Working for an illegal resistance group could bring the man a death sentence. I pointed this out to Ireland: he called me “holier-than-thou.” When HRW followed up on the case, we concluded that the man probably never existed.

On July 19, people gathered in more than 20 cities to express their outrage at injustice. Rage must be tempered by responsibility, though. That’s all HRW has said throughout this controversy.

If we want to challenge Iran’s government, we need facts. There is enough proof of torture and repression that we can do without claims of “pogroms.” If we want to act, we need a goal. That means listening to Iranian dissidents, straight and gay—such as Akbar Ganji, the heroic journalist who last week refused to meet with Bush administration officials because he believes U.S. policy cannot promote democracy in Iran.

Finally, we need debate. We should discuss the facts and question where our actions are leading. With war and peace hanging in the balance, gay and lesbian Iranians’ lives should not be fodder for our own “battles.”

*Long is the director of HRW’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Project.*

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