

Waiting to hear from America

By Azadeh Pourzand

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When people say the United States should talk to Iran, I want to tell them my story.

My parents are considered serious threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran. My mother, Mehrangiz Kar, a prominent women's rights activist and lawyer, was imprisoned in 2000. After two months in solitary confinement, she was found guilty of criticizing the regime and supporting the reform movement.

My father, Siamak Pourzand, a 76-year-old journalist, was kidnapped in 2001, held in unknown prisons and treated violently. His crime, too, was criticizing the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I was 16 when I came to the United States. Already traumatized by my mother's imprisonment, I had to face the ordeal of my father's disappearance.

So when people say the United States should talk to Iran, I ask: Talk to whom?

If the United States just talks to the regime of the Islamic Republic, what does it say to my mother and father? What does it say to the parents of 20-year-old Makvan Mouloudzadeh, who was hanged last month for having sex with other boys when he was 13 years old?

What does the United States say to the people of Iran themselves?

In an act of bravery by ordinary citizens, Iranians told pollsters in a phone survey this summer by the independent organization Terror Free Tomorrow that they reject the undemocratic political structure in Iran and want full democracy. Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed across every province of Iran said they want free elections and normal relations with the outside world - 70 percent with the United States. Only 11 percent of Iranians said they support the current system.

The last time people were asked their opinion in an open and fair survey in September 2002, the Iranian pollsters led by Abbas Abdi were jailed.

Except for being seen as a potential military antagonist, the United States is largely absent from the debate inside Iran. Yet after so many years of

isolation, and despite the risk, Iranians - both in blogs and in the survey - are telling the United States and the world they want to hear from them.

They want to hear that the world supports their priorities of trade, technology and normal international relations. They want to hear that the world shares the same goals that Iranians courageously told the pollsters about this summer: full democracy, human rights and economic opportunity for all.

Current American policy toward the Islamic Republic - economic sanctions and threats of military action - is not likely to succeed by itself. The foundation for any American or international policy must give the people of Iran a positive vision of the future.

So rather than debating on whether or not to talk to the regime, it is time for the United States and the international community to talk to the Iranian people as well. Iranians look forward to the day when we can live in peace, with dignity, human rights and free economic opportunity. We need to hear, publicly, that America shares our future goals.

My mother, father, the parents of Makvan Moulloodzadeh and the average citizens who bravely answered the poll this summer need to hear from America too.

Azadeh Pourzand graduated from Oberlin College last June.