

Iran, Apartheid, and Canada

In the tradition of Mulroney and Diefenbaker, they should pursue another bill like S-219, enabling Canada to balance its current policy of fig-leaf diplomacy with some modicum of legislative teeth.



by Danny Eisen
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In a recent Senate [debate](#), Senator Dennis Patterson invoked the spectre of apartheid in arguing for a more robust Canadian policy towards Iran.

Urging his colleagues to take an international lead in confronting Iran's human rights violations, he implored fellow senators to follow the examples set by Prime Ministers Diefenbaker and Mulroney.

These two men had stood alone in pursuing sanctions against South Africa's apartheid regime, despite the anger of Canada's allies and the protestations of what was then known as the Department of External Affairs.

The Senator issued his plea while speaking in favour of [Bill S-219](#) which sought to maintain Canadian sanctions on Iran for its terrorism and human rights abuses.

While the fortitude of Diefenbaker and Mulroney may be worthy of emulation, it would still be legitimate to question whether apartheid is the appropriate construct to associate with Iran's human rights abuses.

The term is often bandied about in political debate to demonize opponents; simplify complex conflicts; and homogenize a wide array of wrongdoings, real or perceived, into a single indistinguishable mass.

Apartheid is a charged word, that along with certain others, has become a metaphor for a category of extreme evil, and should be used very judiciously in political discourse.

But in the specific case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Senator has not run afoul of this need for caution. Apartheid is perhaps the most technically accurate noun or adjective to describe certain aspects of the legal system of the Iranian regime.

I am not referring to Iran's legalization and support of international terrorism; its genocidal incitements; or its vast domestic industry of execution and mutilation.

Like Tehran's direct complicity in the deaths of over half a million civilians in the Syrian civil war, these outrages fall into other categories of egregious crime or historical precedent, but apartheid would not be one of them.

But what *is* a legitimate object of comparison, is Tehran's canon of statutes and policies targeting Iran's 300,000 Baha'is.

As [noted](#) by Professor Winston Nagan, a former chair of Amnesty International USA: "Having grown up with the indignities of the apartheid system in South Africa, I bristle whenever ... anyone equates a government's

treatment of a portion of its citizenry to apartheid. Usually, the claims are exaggerated. But in Iran today, the government's treatment of the Baha'i community bears striking similarities."

The accuracy of Professor Nagan's assertion can perhaps be encapsulated in a single Iranian legal term. One no less ugly than apartheid, and potentially more lethal.

As explained in a 2014 report by the [U.S. Department of State](#), Baha'i blood in Iranian law is considered "*mobah*" – meaning that it "can be spilled with impunity". In other words, when Baha'is are accosted or murdered in Iran their families are not entitled to restitution.

To be clear, this classification does not reflect a second or even a third-tier status. That indignity is reserved for certain [other groups](#), including Jews, Christians, Sunnis, Sufis, Zoroastrians and women. Their discriminatory privations are also [mandated](#) by Iranian policy and law.

But unlike these groups which have been legally demoted to a lower cast, the Baha'i do not suffer only from the abrogation of certain rights enjoyed by more privileged classes.

As a Washington Post [headline](#) correctly surmised, for Iran's Baha'i, human rights are simply – "non-existent". Or put another way by Canadian journalist [Terry Glavin](#), the Baha'i in Iran are "not legally persons" at all.

Their dehumanization begins at birth. As [reported](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Iranian kindergartens place Baha'i toddlers under special surveillance and the ensuing discrimination [pursues them](#) to the grave.

Their marriages – are deemed illegal; their children – deemed "illegitimate"; their business – are seized; their burial rights – denied; and their cemeteries – are [desecrated](#). They cannot serve in public office; have no recourse to the courts; have no access to universities; and they are arbitrarily imprisoned, tortured and murdered.

This amounts to a comprehensive deconstruction of the essential elements of any human life, and a strategy for the gradual asphyxiation of that community in Iran.

This objective would seem to be born out in a [memorandum](#) issued by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, referring to the Baha'i as deviants and speaking of the need to address what he described as the "Baha'i question".

Given the history of such "questions" when posed by the genocidally inclined, we should be more than disquieted by the "answer" he seems to be intimating.

The Ayatollah's dark musings have indeed found fertile ground in Iran's public sphere and beyond.

In the last five years alone, over 20,000 pieces of hateful [propaganda](#) stigmatizing this minority have appeared in the Iranian media. And that hatred, like all other malign activities on Iran's revolutionary platform, is being exported.

The tiny Baha'i community of Yemen, where Iran is arming the Houthis in a proxy war against the Saudis, is now also facing serious threat.

Just last March, Houthi leader Abdel-Malek al-Houthi delivered a [speech](#) urging Yemenis to defend their country from the "satanic" and "infidel" Baha'is.

Not surprisingly within days of the speech, a prominent Houthi strategist proclaimed unabashedly on social media that "we will butcher every Baha'i."

The sentiment was then echoed by the recently appointed Mufti of Yemen, Shams al-Din Muhammad Sharaf al-Din, who was trained in Iran.

The Baha'i Representative to the UN then warned "that al-Houthi's influence ... as well as the echoing of his sentiments by the highest religious authority in Yemen, by other government officials, and by others on traditional and social media all imply that Mr. al-Houthi's latest speech is a call for mass atrocity crimes against a religious minority which is genocidal in intent."

It should be stressed that the invective of this annihilationist sentiment is not an ugly by-product of another conflict related to land, power or any other geopolitical clash. It was spawned in the ideological centrifuges of Iran's "Islamic Revolution". They have produced a highly enriched culture of hatreds that are a central tenet of the regime's identity and a constitutionally mandated export.

But what sets the Baha'i apart within this wretched system, is not their degraded status as an "inferior" religion, akin to those mentioned previously.

Rather, it is their special designation as a fundamental enemy to very *idea* of religion as defined by this regime. And as an antithesis to religion – an essentially Satanic entity – it is the Bahai's very existence that presents a threat; renders them "*mobah*"; and lays the groundwork for Khamenei's calls for a solution to the "Baha'i question".

Iran's institutionalized hierarchy of hatreds therefore, should not be compared to the self-serving policies of other autocratic regimes that utilize bigotry to further political interests.

Nor should it be attributed to the misbehaviour of corrupt officials within a dysfunctional regime. It is part and parcel of the ideological hard drive of the Islamic Revolution that is the guiding principle of all of Iran's governing factions regardless of their tactical disputes. And it is this principle that distinguishes Iran from other totalitarian states and which permeates every aspect of its domestic and foreign policy.

It is unfortunate then, that Senator Patterson's words went unheeded as Bill S-219 was defeated shortly thereafter.

The bill, thoroughly bipartisan in nature, was [opposed](#) by Global Affairs Canada which feared Iran "would likely respond negatively", and was supported only by Conservative Senators. Disturbingly, there was not a single supporting vote from other parties, despite appeals from experts, representatives of the Iranian-Canadian community, and renowned human rights advocates like former Minister of Justice Irwin Cotler.

The defeat must have provided some small comfort for the Iranian theocracy. While it has suffered considerable setbacks in recent weeks it has surely learned that the Trudeau government and its allies can be counted on to support re-engagement with the regime at almost any cost.

Tehran has undoubtedly taken note of Trudeau's anemic response to the imprisonment and abuse of Canadian citizens in Iran.

It must be delighted that unlike various Russian and Venezuelan officials, not a single Iranian violator has been sanctioned under the provisions of our newly minted Magnitsky provisions. And it must have been pleasantly surprised at Canada's [abstention](#) in holding Hamas – a terrorist organization funded by Iran – unequivocally accountable for its instigation of violence and its self-admitted use of human shields during the recent turbulence on the Gaza border.

As for the proposition by opponents of S-219 that Canadian diplomacy is an effective alternative to this type of legislation, it may have elicited a shrug, at best, from Iranian officials.

The backroom reprimands of our diplomats will hardly disturb a regime that has [proven](#) consistently over four decades that it cannot be bribed, cajoled or brow beaten into relinquishing its ideological commitment to the violating of human rights and the support of terrorism.

But while the Ayatollahs might feel confident they have a pliant partner in the Trudeau government, the thousands of Iranians continuing to protest in Iran and languishing in its prisons, must now be equally sure that they don't.

They deserve better from a Canadian government whose Minister of Foreign Affairs [declared](#) in parliament that "it is our role to set a standard" for how states should treat minorities. And so, do we.

But hopefully, legislators will not relent.

In the tradition of Mulroney and Diefenbaker, they should pursue another bill like S-219, enabling Canada to balance its current policy of fig-leaf diplomacy with some modicum of legislative teeth.

It is perhaps the only effective and honourable way for Canada to contend with the malevolence of this discriminatory theocracy; its spotless record of unrelenting intransigence; and its overt contempt for Canada, its citizens and its values.

<https://www.thepostmillennial.com/iran-apartheid-and-canada/>