

Canada-Iran: Who's demonizing who?

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Region: [Canada](#)

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The return of Omar Khadr from Guantanamo, Canadian Islamophobia, and a trip by a first nation leader to Iran make Harper's human rights award an embarrassment.

After 10 years in Guantanamo, former child soldier Omar Khadr, the last Western national being held there, was finally repatriated last week after years of mistreatment. The illegality of the procedures used against Khadr from day one mean that the Canadian government faces a multi-million dollar law suit for damages. Various court cases against the government failed to convince it to expedite his return, until the US government finally pulled the plug, forcing the Canadian government to take him after his plea of guilty to various charges, clearly made as the only way to end his ordeal and give him hope of eventual release.

At the same time, Egyptian Prosecutor General Abdel Meguid Mahmud has issued arrest warrants for Canadian Egyptians Nader Fawzy Jacques Attalla of Montreal, claiming they were involved in the production of the film "Innocence of Muslims", which defames Islam and led to the death of dozens including the US ambassador to Libya, and the closing of Canada's embassies in Egypt and Libya (since reopened). Of course, both Coptic Christian activists insist on their own "innocence". Attalla asked for police protection, claiming he and his family in Egypt are now targets of potential violence, calling the arrest warrant issued by the prosecutor general a "fatwa". As if to confirm his own guilt, Attalla said, "Egypt was exporting civilisation before and now it's exporting terrorism and killing and hatred." It will take some doing for the Conservatives to finesse this diplomatic tangle.

To top it all off, there are the ongoing ramifications of the breaking of relations with Iran last month, disrupting the lives of thousands of Iranians in Canada and making it virtually impossible for Canadians to go to Iran. One Canadian who is willing to defy the government action is former chief of Manitoba's Roseau River First Nation Terrance Nelson, who is travelling to Tehran (via Switzerland) as part of an exploratory mission to discuss resource development and human rights abuses in Canada.

Nelson said Iranians and Canada's natives have a lot in common as victims of European colonialism. The Indian Act was passed in 1876 by the Parliament of Canada, confirming the expropriation of native lands that had taken place since the first white settlers came, and the relegation of natives to "reserves" under the federal government's authority. In Iran at that time, Western capitalists were bribing the corrupt Nasser al-Din Shah to allow them to control the entire Persian economy. A century of invasion, subversion and rule by more Western-backed shahs finally ended in 1979, when Western domination came to an abrupt end, but in the process turned Iran into the West's *bete noire*, demonized in the mainstream media ever since.

The First Nation leader was grilled by the *National Post* in a joint interview with Iranian-born activist (and former Miss World Canada) Nazanin Afshin-Jam, who also just happens to be the wife of Defence Minister Peter MacKay. She called Nelson's trip "a real insult to Iranians, Canadians and the entire international community" and accused Iran of wanting "to use him for the purposes of demonizing Canada in forums such as the UN Human Rights Council".

When asked to condemn Iran on human rights abuses, Nelson pointed out that there are serious human rights abuses in Canada which are not given prominence in the mainstream media. He complained that the hysteria in the media made it very difficult for him to pursue his efforts to gain recognition for Canada's native people. "What the western media says is not always true. Nobody gave a damn about half-a-million children dying in Iraq in 1998."

When it was suggested that the Iranian government would enlist First Nations to perpetrate violence against Canada, he laughed. "When have First Nations people ever bombed anything? The worst we've ever done is make the white man late for lunch when we do our protests in the city street." He accused the West of perpetrating insidious violence against countries it victimizes through sanctions, including against both Iraq in the 1990s and Iran today.

He said his hope was to break down the unjustified bias against Iran. "We know what demonization is all about because we've been demonized in our own land." Nelson praised Tehran for raising the human rights issues of indigenous people in Canada and called for the Non-Aligned Movement, which Iran now presides over, to address the plight of Canada's aboriginal population.

As for Afshin-Jam's claim that the Iranian government was using native Canadians to blacken Canada's reputation at the UN, there is no need, as there is lots of evidence of Canadian government negligence of human rights under the current Conservative regime. At the top of the list is the defunding of five renowned human rights NGOs — the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Kairos, Status of Women Canada and the Court Challenges Program — affecting tens of thousands of Canadians and victims of violence around the world. Furthermore, Harper prorogued Parliament twice, becoming the first prime minister ever to be found guilty of contempt of Parliament, and flagrantly ignores freedom of speech by muzzling senior bureaucrats, withholding and altering documents, and launching personal attacks on whistleblowers. There is an ongoing investigation into voting fraud perpetrated by the Conservatives in the last election.

Despite Harper's notoriety, he was chosen 2012 World Statesman of the Year for his work as a "champion of democracy, freedom and human rights" by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation (set up by Rabbi Arthur Schneier in 1965). He chose to boycott the UN gathering of heads of state taking place just down the street in New York (perhaps afraid of criticism?). Instead, in his address at the Waldorf Astoria, he accused the UN of wooing dictators with an "appalling record of human rights abuse", implying of course the Iranian leadership.

But he should consider his own "appalling record of human rights abuse". And answer Terrance Nelson's question: "If the Iranian government is willing to take our case forward, that is fine. Why isn't the German government, or the American government, or the English government, or the French government doing it? Why hasn't the Israeli government said anything? Have they condemned Canada?"

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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