

## Sean Penn: Our Man in Teheran

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The Iranian writer Afshin Molavi knows well the politics of Sean Penn. Writing on Saturday on the blog “Iran Scan,” Molavi penned an accurate [appraisal](#) of the actor’s current trip, supposedly under the auspices of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to cover the forthcoming election in Iran.

“I wonder how Sean Penn will see things,” Molavi wrote. “Will he honestly portray what he sees? Or will he be blinded by his hatred of President George W. Bush to fall into the trap many a good leftist falls into: defending the Islamic Republic to take a jab at Bush. Progressives in America consistently fail to side with the forces for democracy in Iran because it might just seem too, well, Wolfowitzian or, worse, Rumsfeldian.”

My own recent conversation with a member of one such “progressive” organization, Global Exchange, which may be sponsoring Penn’s trip covertly, as well as previous experience with another organization created by Global Exchange founder Medea Benjamin, lead me believe that Molavi’s apprehensions are well founded.

On Friday, June the 10, Reuters and the *Drudge Report* reported that Penn had been sent by the *San Francisco Chronicle* to cover the imminent Iranian elections. Iranian dissidents and activists who oppose the Islamic Republic, inside and outside Iran, were outraged at the news. They know that Penn is famous for his left-wing radical politics, and suspect that his current trip to Iran will be a repeat of the actor’s earlier trip to Iraq just before the war. At the time, Penn was welcomed by Saddam Hussein, who intended to enlist Penn into his propaganda army of useful idiots from the democratic West—all in an effort to save his dictatorial regime. Significantly, Penn’s trip to Iraq had been organized by Global Exchange, the brainchild of radical leftist activist Medea Benjamin. Benjamin, who has described Castro’s Cuba as “heaven,” hoped to cast the Baathist dictatorship in a similarly flattering light.

Is Global Exchange behind Penn's current trip to Iran? The evidence suggests that it is. Reached by telephone, the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Andrew Ross told me that the paper had in fact discussed the idea of Penn going to Iran. So far as he knew, however, Penn was still in the U.S.—waiting to hear back from the Washington D.C. about whether he could obtain a visa. Ross was entirely unaware that Penn had not only received the visa but had already arrived in Iran. When one considers that Global Exchange regularly organizes such “reality tours” for left-wing activists with a soft spot for anti-American dictatorships—theocratic Iran, in Global Exchange parlance, is an unjustly “demonized country”—the suspicion hardens that Penn's recent venture was made possible by the activist organization.

To find out more, I (BZB) called the headquarters of Global Exchange. The conversation I had with a member was not unlike one I had several years ago, when I placed a call to the New York chapter of International A.N.S.W.E.R. I wanted to see whether I could appeal to the group's much-professed concern for Iran and involve them in the international activities to free my father Siamak Pourzand, an Iranian intellectual and political prisoner in Iran. An ANSWER activist with whom I spoke gave a revealing reply. Dismissing the democracy movement in Iran, he claimed that it was “a tool in the hands of American imperialists.” Moreover, he said, if Siamak Pourzand was detained, he likely deserved it because he was “breaking the rules” by protesting against his government. When I pointed that by his own logic *he* should be in jail because of his opposition to the policies of the U.S. government, he abruptly ended the conversation, calling me a fascist, then hanging up.

We both realized on that occasion that there are two categories of political prisoners in this world. One category can be used in anti-America propaganda; thus, the A.N.S.W.E.R. activists and similar so-called “human rights” organizations will do everything to “save the heroes” of the anti-US, anti-“imperialism” struggle. The other category, which includes most of the Iranian people, is known for being particularly U.S.-friendly; thus, it is considered dangerous and therefore completely disregarded.

We were prepared for a similar exchange when I called Global Exchange this time. I began by trying to contact the group's token Iranian woman, Ladan, who, mysteriously, is unknown to the Iranian activist community in the Bay Area. The receptionist told us that Ladan did not work on Fridays and offered to put us through to Ladan's supervisor, Malia. The phone conversation began politely and pleasantly. I asked if we could get some comments about the organization's efforts in getting Penn into Iran. Malia then asked what this was for and I explained that it was for an article that would analyze the pros and cons of such an action from the standpoint of the Iranian people. Once again, I mentioned *my* father's incarceration. In contrast to the response from the fellow at A.N.S.W.E.R., I was met with a kind and gentle concern. It did not last long.

I asked why, given its presumed concern for Iran, had Global Exchange failed to recruit someone like Sean Penn for a high-profile visit to Iran during the 1999 massacres of university students. For that matter, why had the group failed to make noises when Iranian intellectuals, artists, filmmakers, and journalists were being assassinated? Why did it fail to protest when Iranian women were being sold in advertised sex-slave auctions in the Persian Gulf nations? Malia, who was still quite well-mannered, explained that Global Exchange organized trips to Iran were not for people who just want to observe. She did not mention that these observers are mostly activists with political agendas and chips on their shoulders against their own countries, who come to Iran to interpret the nature of our struggle. The same is true of many Western journalists: What little media coverage Iran gets is riddled with their ignominious ideological interpretations. (Iranian journalists writing for the foreign press of course have to curb the truth to avoid imprisonment.) Now, Sean Penn, who sees Iran as merely another photo op, will be obscure the already limited coverage of Iran with his megastar celebrity.

Malia bristled at this suggestion: "We want to help your people not be manipulated by Imperialists...don't you see?"

"Do you mean to tell us that you think Iranians are so ignorant that they need *you* to help them distinguish the bad guys from the good?" I demanded. "That is the most ignorant and racist comment ever! Do you mean to tell us that being bilked for 26 years by the European Union, Russia, China, Cuba, etc...has left us stupid enough to still require your help? Have you ever been to Iran, Malia?"

"No," she admitted, "but we have an Iranian woman, Ladan, working here and she knows what she's doing!" "But no one in the Iranian activist community in San Francisco knows who she is," I protested. "And for each Ladan who comes to work for you guys, I can show you 100,000 inside Iran who have no use for Ladan's well-cushioned ideology-mongering life in the U.S.; let us be clear here and tell you that from where we're standing, it is this level of hubris and cultural Imperialism that makes people outside the U.S. dislike Americans...it's not because of the so-called liberals rant about big business...*everyone* in the world of business is cutthroat...that's the nature of business but when it comes to big-foot, bull-in-a-china-shop political attitude of stomping into a country that you're not from, to tell the natives how to do things – as if we're too stupid to know better - vilifying the natives who don't agree with you or sending a Sean Penn with no idea of our country's culture, history, people's mentality and needs, you take the cake in what we call cultural imperialism....You are seriously *disrespecting* our ways...we're not Iraqis or Afghans..."

Angrily, Malia retorted: "It's the likes of *you* who's lived in the U.S. too long! Global Exchange provides a perspective."

"I appreciate your concern," I said, "but from where I'm standing, it's clear that you think that you can use the Iran issues as a tool to beat the Bush administration over the head with and we simply won't let you." The issues that Global Exchange has with the U.S. government, I said, have nothing to do with Iranians' issues with the terrorists who've hijacked the country. I informed her that I had approached her organization and others like it dozens of times, hoping that they would give voice to Iran's political prisoners and students, only to be ignored. Now they were sending Penn to Iran as an observer?

At this point, Malia began screaming, accusing me of being a "right-wing imperialist," and summarily hung up.

For some of my Western friends, even the ones who would like to see a free and democratic Iran, my anger at groups like Global Exchange is difficult to understand. They suggest that Iranians are over-reacting: What, they ask, is all the fuss about Sean Penn traveling to Iran.

To them, we suggest that they consider the damage done to Iran by Western activists, intellectuals, journalists, or anyone with media exposure, who over the years have proclaimed themselves experts after a few days in Tehran, but who knew very little about the country's history and culture. Examples of such misguided intellectuals are Oriana Fallaci, who ridiculed the Shah in her book "Interview with History," and the pompous French philosopher, Michel Foucault, who was France's dominant public intellectual when he went to Tehran in 1978 as a "novice" journalist to witness the "revolutionary" events unfold. He was writing for major Italian and French newspapers, and enthusiastically supported the Islamist movement, which he praised as "the first great insurrection against global systems and modernity." His writings shaped public opinion in the West, where the average reader was easily convinced that an inept, corrupt, and megalomaniac Shah described by Fallaci had finally found his nemesis in the Islamic revolutionary movement which, according to Foucault, reflected the "perfectly unified collective will" of the people.

At this crucial moment, what Iran does not need is another Sean Penn, another "novice" journalist with a similar agenda has descended to "report." The last few weeks have seen an acceleration of anti-regime activities, mostly unreported by Western mainstream media. Last week, Akbar Ganji, a prominent journalist, dissident, political prisoner, and one of the emerging leaders of the movement against the regime, went missing while on a week's release for a medical furlough. In response, two thousand people chained themselves to the gates of his house, an event that went unreported by the western media. Ganji has spent five years in prison for linking senior figures in the regime to the killings of journalists and intellectuals in the late 1990s. Women's groups led by the poet Simin Behbahani (who is now also emerging as one of the leaders of

the anti-regime movement) have gathered at Tehran University to protest gender apartheid and the violation of Woman and Human Rights in Iran, while denouncing the bogus National Elections that Penn is to cover for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

It remains to be seen what Penn will make of the election, but left-wing radical groups like A.N.S.W.E.R. and Global Exchange already have their story: they hope to legitimize the elections in Iran as popular and fair, and to condemn the support for the anti-regime movement given by President Bush and his administration as yet another imperial attempt to expand American influence at the expense of an elected government.

Ironically, they may yet fail, in part, because of Sean Penn. Iranian bloggers and student leaders inside Iran have informed me that Penn's presence in Iran is having the unwanted (for the actor and Global Exchange) effect of galvanizing the Iranian youth in its stance against the Mullahs. If a movie star of the caliber of Sean Penn is in Iran, the young Iranians figure, this means that Iran is important; the eyes of the world are on Tehran. This is a great chance to let the world know how despised the ruling clerics are.

We can expect more frantic activity organized by the opposition movement between now and the day of the elections. Such anti-regime endeavors likely won't be reported by Penn. Fortunately, it may not matter.