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Sweden and Human Rights: Proud, Sanctimonious and Conflicted



A refugee from the Middle East looks at a map of Sweden at the train station in the southern coastal city of Malmö.

EPA-EFE/OLA TORKESSON

As Swedes go the polls this weekend, the positions of the political parties on human rights will be a key determinant for many voters. For decades, Swedish governments have worked to build their country's reputation as the world's leading human rights advocate.

Their work has paid off. Sweden – which self-describes as the “first feminist government in the world” – holds the top ranking for countries that “care most about human rights.” This reputation confers a big benefit to Swedish companies who want their brands to be seen as responsible and virtuous. But the reputation belies the reality.

Swedish business leaders do not deserve such a benefit. From the safety of Stockholm, some of the country's top business leaders appear content to enrich themselves and human rights abusers overseas while profiting from Sweden's reputation as an unwavering defender of human rights at home and abroad. This has to end.

Case in point: Sweden's Volvo Trucks proudly signals its commitment to human rights by broadcasting how it was one of the first companies to sign the United Nations Global Compact – the gold standard in corporate social responsibility whose First Principle is, “Businesses should support and respect the protection of

internationally proclaimed human rights.” Yet Volvo Trucks is willingly doing business with human rights abusers through its ongoing business in Iran.

Swedish industrial firm Alfa Laval's CEO Tom Erixon has likewise declared his company “is committed to upholding human rights.” But despite an Alfa Laval statement last year acknowledging that Iran business was “not quite straightforward,” the company he leads still has an operation in Iran.

Their current position in the Iranian market is part of a worrying current in Swedish business circles that is flowing counter to the bulk of other European firms swiftly exiting Iran. According to their own websites, other leading Swedish multinationals SKF are likewise doing Iran business – and are not showing interest in disentangling themselves any time soon. Last month, the Swedish-Swiss conglomerate ABB declined to confirm its intentions to withdraw in a letter to United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI). Instead it stated it was “finalizing existing contracts in Iran in line with existing trade regulations.”

They all know – and UANI has reminded them in repeated communications – that any foreign firm selling to Iran's industrial and construction sectors specifically

risks dealing with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian regime's agency used to violently “suppress internal dissent [and] human rights.”

The leaders of these companies also know that Iranians are risking their lives as they take to the streets in anti-regime demonstrations. At least one protester was shot and killed by Iranian security forces last week. During protests in January, 25 people were killed and more than 4,000 were arrested.

The security forces are directed by the regime, which is supported by the flow of foreign capital. But this doesn't seem to trouble many Swedish companies.

On August 8 – two days after the U.S. reimposed sanctions on Iran's automotive sector – Volvo Group told UANI that it was “continuing to closely monitor how the situation is developing.” In other words, Sweden's flagship corporation still wants to stick around in Iran.

But the time for “close monitoring” has passed. The continued presence of Volvo Group, Alfa Laval and other Swedish firms in Iran in this environment shows the extent to which they are out of step with their people and their government. But in the face of the mass exodus of other European companies from Iran as the risk of secondary sanctions intensifies, it also

shows a shocking and irresponsible level of risk tolerance.

In the meantime, as these companies enrich themselves and the regime, Swedish politicians can start to take action to demonstrate the unease they feel when companies profit at the expense of people. The next government is likely to be led by the ruling Social Democrats. Whoever ends up in power must stop these companies from profiting at the expense Sweden's human rights reputation.

One concrete way to do this would be to terminate government contracts with companies that continue to do business in Iran. Swedish companies can either do business with human rights defenders or human rights abusers. They cannot be allowed to do both.

Sweden preaches the sanctity of human rights and vaunts its record to promote these ideals around the world. Its leading global businesses should reflect those ideals and if they do not, the Swedish government should take steps to compel them to withdraw. Because as it stands, as Iranian citizens take to the streets at the risk of life and limb, the well-cultivated Swedish reputation is being corroded. Dozens of European and now Asian companies are packing their bags and leaving Iran. Do the Swedes want to be the ones left to turn off the lights?