

# Preparing for Regime Change in Iran

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October 4, 2016

“Maryam Rajavi, your endeavor to rid your people of the Khomeinist cancer is an historic epic that...will remain inscribed in the annals of history.” -His Royal Highness, Prince Turki Al Faisal

On July 9, 2016, I observed a rally in Paris at which Prince Turki of Saudi Arabia, former ambassador to the U.S. and intelligence chief but no longer in any official position, addressed Maryam Rajavi, President-Elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI). The Turki option -- regime change in Iran -- turned up the heat on Tehran. When the crowd chanted, “The people want regime change,” the Prince joined the crowd in Arabic saying, “I, too, want regime change” in Iran, a remark that brought the house down.

With some Arabs leading the call, various dissidents like the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) core of the NCRI are accelerating their calls for regime change in Iran. The Arab conflict with Iran has been mainly sectarian, but Turki sought to move the conflict to a strategic level with a greater focus on removing the “revolutionary” nature of Iran’s regime. With some support for the NCRI in the U.S. Congress, European national parliaments, and the European Parliament, it is time for the West to join this effort.

## Prince Turki’s Option

In “The Saudi Cold War with Iran Heats up,” Kim Ghattas views the new cold war in the narrow context of negotiations between Iran and the major powers over Tehran’s nuclear file. But “The Iranians and US: A Shared Civilization Marred by Revolutionary ‘Identity’ Policies,” Turki’s talk, contains an argument that contrasts to the historically risk-averse nature of the Saudis, signaling the rising temperature of the cold war against revolutionary Iran. In his speech, Turki stated that, “Iranian policies under the Khomeinist regime since 1979 are based on the principle of exporting the revolution, which violates the sovereignty of countries in the name of supporting vulnerable and helpless people.” Consider Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen: Iraq changed from a Sunni- to a Shia-controlled country and shifted from Riyadh’s orbit into Tehran’s. The change was a huge setback for Riyadh and an

unexpected strategic gift for Tehran.

Turki claimed that Khomeini strayed away from Iran's glorious cultural roots and adopted the inglorious identity of revolutionary policies, which placed Iran on a collision course with Saudi Arabia. Turki also highlighted an historical alliance with the Iranian people, further shifting the Saudi stance from shallow sectarian clashes to a celebration of the Persians: "Persian culture helped raise the Islamic World to greater heights of scientific and artistic accomplishment." As such, the Prince reserved his hostile words for revolutionaries ruling Iran, rather than the Persian people.

The import of Turki's speech is in the press coverage in the Arab Gulf. Events were aired live on several Arabic news channels, including Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya and Al Hadath, as well as Abu Dhabi-based Sky News Arabia. Many prominent dailies of Saudi Arabia and the Arab world provided front-page reports, several with photos. The positive reaction in the Arab world to the speech shows a thirst to embrace an alternative to the ayatollahs as a way to counter Iran's rising threat.

## The Way Forward

Prince Turki stated that, "The Khomeinist regime has brought only destruction, sectarianism, conflict and bloodshed – not only to their own people in Iran, but across the Middle East. This is not the way forward." Then what is the way?

The first step is to strictly limit U.S. "engagement" with Tehran. Clinton is likely to take a harder line as she did in the nuclear deal's preliminary talks while Secretary of State. If major violations of the nuclear deal occur, congressional oversight would make it difficult for the next president to engage Iran. And if Donald Trump were elected, he pledged to renegotiate the deal, which hardly favors engagement. A bipartisan coalition on Capitol Hill would place constraints on the next president and decrease the prospects for engagement.

Engaging the regime has emboldened Tehran to escalate human rights violations at home. Even during the presidency of the "moderate" Hassan Rouhani, over 2,600 people have been executed, religious and ethnic minorities have faced ever-increasing restrictions, and prison conditions have worsened. Engaging Iran results in human rights violations without any western pushback.

Second, the U.S. should enhance existing sanctions. This action reverts to Republican-inspired coercive diplomacy that brought Iran to the table. But sanctions alone are insufficient to keep the regime in compliance. So before the 2016 summer break, the House approved three new bills against Iran: blocking Iran's access to the dollar outside of the U.S. financial system, sanctioning any sector of Tehran's economy that directly or indirectly has applications for Iran's ballistic missile program, and prohibiting Washington from buying heavy water from Iran. Enhancing sanctions has many positive benefits and few negative ones: Tehran is unlikely to jeopardize its bonus from the nuclear deal because of such financial sanctions.

Third, we must embrace regime change, because sanctions alone are insufficient to keep the regime in compliance. Publicly backing the Iranian opposition for regime change is the "Turki option," and the one that better ensures long-term compliance because the dissidents do not favor nuclear weapons.

## Why Regime Change Is Desirable

Empowering the Iranian people assumes that the coalition of opposition groups has enough of a following within Iran to bring down the regime, as it did in 1979. However, this brings up the possible downside of regime change: Will it remain peaceful? Critics cite 1979 Iran, as well as 2011 Libya, Egypt, and Syria, all peaceful demonstrations that morphed into violence and hence gave regime change from within a bad name.

But supporting democratic change in Iran does not necessarily mean a repeat of Egypt or Libya; both lacked

democratic alternatives to fill the vacuum. Islamist oppositionists seized control at least in parts of each Arab country where a popular uprising has undermined the government. Iran would be different.

Unlike some other countries in the Middle East that went through regime change, Iran has the most important ingredient for success: a viable and indigenous alternative. Islamists are already in power, and there is an anti-Islamist opposition movement with a clear pro-Western platform. With a nudge from the West, Iranian dissidents could be capable of challenging the regime and replacing it in a comparatively peaceful transition. What evidence supports this assertion? Georgetown University students and colleagues in the Iran Policy Committee conducted a study to assess the image of the NCRI and other Iranian dissident groups, including organizations not espousing regime change. Using the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) for the period from January-December 2005, we performed a content analysis and determined the NCRI/MEK was the topic of discussion almost four times as often as all other dissident organizations combined.

We updated the 2005 study by using the large number of attacks by the IRGC or Iranian proxies against the NCRI. Again, the NCRI family of entities were targeted more than other rebellious minorities in Iran. In addition, the Iranian regime regularly sets up expositions throughout the country to convince Iranians to refrain from paying any attention to the NCRI.

If the regime were not so leery of the NCRI, they would hardly pay so much attention to it. Furthermore, Iran would not spend its political capital with foreign governments asking them to suppress the group or seek the destruction of Camp Ashraf/Liberty in Iraq, where MEK dissidents were confined in exile at Liberty until September 9, 2016.

What about alternatives to the NCRI, such as the so-called Green Movement, which moved hundreds of thousands of Iranian into street protests in 2009? Some consider it to be the main opposition to the regime. In contrast to the NCRI, the Greens accept clerical rule, hardly an indication that this “movement” opposes the regime. The two most prominent Greens, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and former Speaker of the Majles Mehdi Karroubi want the Constitution to be implemented completely, which means they accept clerical rule. Also, Mousavi praised the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei and the first Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini. Finally, since February 2011 both Mousavi and Karroubi have lived under strict house arrest, which is not an indication that the Greens should be taken seriously.

To be sure, the vast majority of former officials and think tank analysts doubt if any opposition coalition is capable of bringing down the regime. If the West were to provide public rhetorical and technical support for regime change, however, the present NCRI family of organizations could expand to include minorities, as happened when the Iranian people brought down the Shah.

The 2009 uprising showed that millions in Iran wanted regime change, a goal espoused by the NCRI, whose members paid a disproportionate price for participation. Some Arab governments are now lining up with Iranian dissidents because they perceive the revolutionary enemy regime at their doorstep. As the Prince attempts to redraw the arc of history, this is the time for the West to join the coalition that could shape the future.

## **MEHDI KHALAJI**

### **(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/khalaji-mehdi>) RESPONDS**

**H**owever hard it seems for Iran to fight against the United States’ “soft war,” nothing appears easier and less costly than mobilizing Iranians worldwide against Saudi Arabia or poisoning their conscience with anti-Arab sentiments.

The Islamic Republic was always criticized by traditional clergy for its pan-Islamic tendencies, overlooking Shiite

identity, and prioritizing its political agenda over the sectarian cause. On the other hand, millions of Iranians are unhappy with Shiite-Islamic orientations of Iran's regional and foreign policies. Engaging in a public "wild word war" against Iran is nothing but to play a game whose rules are set by the Islamic Republic: both groups of critics rally behind Iran and find not only Iran's anti-Saudi policies but also the regime's military intervention in various parts of the region thoroughly legitimate and necessary.

Along with the complex socio-cultural fabric of Iranian people, there all kinds of religious, nationalist, leftist, and rightist motivations to "hate" Saudi Arabia, believing in Iran's absolute right to confront Arab ambitions and aspirations in the region. This is why no one should be shocked to see the silent face of Iranian democratic opposition or clergy vis-a-vis the human catastrophe in Syria, for which the Iranian regime is partially responsible. One should not look for the origin of anti-Arab sentiments in ancient time: the collective memory of Iranians is full of vivid images of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in which most Arab governments left Iran alone and supported its enemy.

When the Saudi senior mufti calls Iranians – indiscriminately - "non-Muslims," Iranians hail Ayatollah Khamenei's stance when he calls Saudi government "a damned bad tree," an allusion to a verse from the Quran (Ibrahim:26): "the parable of a bad word is a bad tree: uprooted from the face of earth, it has no stability".

Relying on the MEK for regime change is like using a hammer to deconstruct a sophisticated electronic machine. If regime change is assumed a plausible, cost-effective, and balanced option, deep knowledge about the nature of the regime is the first step. But in the last four decades, Saudis have proven their lack of knowledge about Iranian perception of Saudi-Arabs, the nature of the regime they desire to change, and the regime's various opposition groups, as well as Iranian public perception about MEK.

Despite being the most organized opposition group, MEK is the most notorious organization which finds the least support among Iranians inside and outside the country. There are many reasons for this: its structure is more similar to a cult than a political entity; it is more Islamist than Islamic Republic (one only has to look at its dress code for female members); it is less democratic than the regime it dreams to change; and most importantly, its alliance with the enemy at war, Saddam Hussein, fighting with him against Iran during the war. There is no better self-defeating strategy than supporting MEK publicly or associating with it in confronting Iran. This proves Iranian government claims: our enemies are not only the government's enemies but the people's enemies. For the overwhelming majority of Iranians, both Saddam Hussein and the MEK's anti-Iran role in the war were charged by Saudi money.

Ignoring such perceptions, engaging in inflammatory rhetoric against Iran or Iranians, avoiding accountability for incidents like Mena and fueling the fire of sectarian tensions could only empower the radical hardcore of the Islamic Republic, legitimizing its destabilizing, aggressive regional policies and restoring its ties with potential future or former domestic critics.

No one is able change the regime if he overlooks his own image in people's minds. Saudis have the right to be worried about Iran's regional agenda and aspirations. But this is not enough. Acquiring deep knowledge about the government, the people, and the opposition is vital. Instead of self-defeating policies like relying on the MEK, it would be wiser if Saudis start thinking about designing effective cutting-edge frameworks and apparatus for public diplomacy toward Iran. ❖



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