

Don't Throw Iran's Democrats under the Bus

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Apr 13, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Articles & Testimony

In pursuing a nuclear deal with Tehran, Obama is betting against the future.

You wouldn't know it from following the news, but the nuclear impasse is not the only issue dividing Iran and the United States. In his latest message to the Iranian people on the occasion of their festival Nowruz in March, U.S. President Barack Obama emphasized another: human rights. After describing at length how "the Iranian people are denied the basic freedom to access the information that they want," he announced measures to penetrate "the electronic curtain that is cutting the Iranian people off from the world."

It's difficult, by contrast, to find any mention of Iran's human rights record in the many background briefings and on-the-record comments by officials of the P5+1 - Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States -- ahead of Saturday's negotiations with Iran in Istanbul. Proposals for how to resolve the nuclear standoff pour forth from pundits, but few if any include suggestions for what to do about Iran's jailing of journalists, execution of hundreds of people per year, persecution of religious minorities, or other human rights problems.

Indeed, Iranian dissidents chafe at the attention the West gives to the nuclear impasse, and Iranian reformers have long feared that their interests will come second to a nuclear deal. As noted dissident Akbar Ganji warned in his September 2006 "Letter to America" in the Washington Post, "We believe the government in Tehran is seeking a secret deal with the United States. It is willing to make any concession, provided that the United States promises to remain silent about the regime's repressive measures at home."

One reason Iranian democrats worry that we would throw them under a bus for a nuclear deal is because that is exactly what we would do. The cold truth is that the West, including the United States, would gladly negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran's hardliners at the expense of Iranian human rights and democracy. If all it took to reach a nuclear deal were to remain silent about Tehran's repression, the prospects for a deal would be excellent. But in fact what holds up the deal is that Iran is not prepared to give up much of its nuclear program and the West is not convinced that the Islamic Republic would live up to any commitment it makes. What's more, the West -- especially the United States -- is not willing to offer much in trade so long as the fundamental geostrategic conflict with Iran remains.

Not only is a nuclear deal unlikely, but Iran's past record strongly suggests that it would not stick to a deal for long.

Iran accepted an enrichment freeze in 2003 (only to immediately cheat, claiming that it was just continuing research on enrichment) and agreed to a renewed freeze in late 2003. Only later did Iranian officials acknowledge that the freeze had come at a convenient moment for Iran, which was having problems getting its centrifuges to work. Once those technical problems were solved and international pressure faded as America's seeming victory in Iraq turned to dust, Iran broke the freeze in February 2006 and installed about 2,500 centrifuges in the next year and a half, bringing its total to about 3,000. By August 2009, Iran had installed roughly 9,000 centrifuges. It is not clear, in other words, whether the temporary two-and-a-half-year freeze actually made much difference in the pace of Iran's nuclear progress.

A good argument can therefore be made that counting on sustained implementation of a deal is at least as risky a gamble as supporting democrats. Why gamble for the sake of a modest and temporary agreement that does not resolve the many other U.S. complaints about the Islamic Republic -- such as its state sponsorship of terrorism -- when the alternative is to gamble on a democratic movement? Instead of focusing on a nuclear deal, why not continue to use sanctions and covert action to slow down Iran's nuclear program while stepping up political pressure regarding Iran's human rights violations and providing more support for Iranian democrats, primarily through covert programs? Some may argue that political change in Iran will take time. Actually, revolutions happen quickly and blow up out of nowhere, as we have seen across the Middle East. Nobody predicted the 2009 protests that brought millions out to Tehran's streets. So let's be honest: We have no idea when change could come to Iran.

In the unlikely event of a deal, the Iranian regime is highly likely to trumpet such an agreement as proof that the West does not care about the Iranian opposition and that the regime's hold is rock solid. That claim could resonate in Iran and disillusion democrats about the West -- not good in general but particularly not good if the democrats ever come to power. Sixty years ago, the United States, for geostrategic reasons, supported an autocratic Iranian government (that of the shah) against a popular movement (led by Mohammad Mossadegh). The result was not good for the U.S. image around the world and was disastrous for Iran. Before shoring up another autocratic Iranian government for geostrategic gain, we should pause to weigh the risks and benefits, especially if we are not completely sure the Iranian regime will stick to the deal.

For the United States to stay silent on human rights out of fear of how such statements might affect negotiations is to confuse ends and means. Negotiations are one way to advance U.S. interests, not an interest in themselves. A more democratic Iran that is more respectful of human rights would serve the interests of both Americans and Iranians. Such a reality would put the two countries on a path toward resolving not only the nuclear crisis but also state support for terrorism and interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. A democratic Iran would become a normal state rather than a revolutionary cause.

I would be the first to say that I do not see much evidence that Iranian democrats will come to power any time soon. But I know someone who thinks this is a realistic prospect, and his name is Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He frequently warns about the danger of a velvet revolution -- a quick overthrow of the Islamic Republic by a popular movement of youth, women, and intellectuals stirred up by Western media like the BBC. Presumably Khamenei knows something about Iranian politics and Iranian public opinion.

It is not the place of outsiders to determine what kind of government Iran should have, but we are not indifferent to the outcome of the power struggles in Tehran. Even while strenuously objecting to what it saw as a "regime change" policy by the Bush administration, the New York Times wrote in an editorial on April 11, 2006, "The best hope for avoiding a nuclear-armed Iran lies in encouraging political evolution there over the next decade." That was true six years ago, and it is true today.

Patrick Clawson is director of research at the Washington Institute and the author or editor of eighteen books and monographs on Iran. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)