

# Implementing Obama's Message Supporting Iranian Human Rights

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## Brief Analysis

**O**n March 20, during his annual speech marking the Iranian New Year, President Obama crystallized recent shifts in U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic. Tellingly, this year's message was addressed to "the people of Iran" rather than to the government, in sharp contrast to Obama's 2009 declaration "I would like to speak clearly to Iran's leaders." Indeed, the 2009 message was about diplomacy, engagement, mutual respect, and constructive ties, with no mention of human rights.

The 2010 message shifted the tone, however, speaking of a "more hopeful future for the Iranian people" and of "working with the international community to hold the Iranian government accountable because they refuse to live up to their international obligations" -- effectively presenting the nuclear issue and human rights as two peas in a pod. This year's message took that shift several steps further, focusing entirely on the regime's "campaign of intimidation and abuse" and the "rights of the Iranian people" without mentioning engagement with Iran's leaders or the nuclear standoff. Obama also quoted poetry by a living Iranian woman instead of a centuries-old classic poet, further accentuating the focus on the people.

Yet, despite emphasizing "values that are universal" and decrying the "unjust actions" of "a government so afraid of its own people," the president did not outline specific ways of supporting "the forces of hope" he cited. A March 14 off-the-record discussion at The Washington Institute could help bridge that gap, showing that there are real, if modest, steps the U.S. government can take to bolster democratic forces in Iran.

## Information

Iranians face great difficulty getting information about what is happening in their country. More than half of the population has access to satellite television, and even more to foreign radio. Outlets such as BBC Persian television

and Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) are among the most important ways Iranians receive news, while the private Fars One satellite network is the most popular station for entertainment programs. Yet Tehran devotes a great deal of effort to jamming these stations -- a clear sign of how threatening they are to the regime.

The U.S. government funds both PNN and Radio Farda, the Persian section of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. In recent years, Farda's twenty-four-hour news and music programs and Persian website have been quite successful in attracting an audience.

For its part, PNN has begun a fresh phase under new director Ramin Asgard, a foreign service officer who previously ran the U.S. Iran-watchers office in Dubai. The network is scheduled to undergo dramatic changes in structure, management, and the format and content of its programming, all in order to gain credibility and popularity. For example, PNN's *Parasit* -- an exceptionally successful weekly satire that has become popular in Iran -- shows how far the network's other programs have to go in terms of professionalism and solid journalism. From its inception, PNN's style has been largely old-fashioned (e.g., long shots of a single talking head), its journalism unimaginative at best, and its credibility at risk of politicization in favor of royalists.

Both Radio Farda and PNN need to be more interactive, using social networks to gather news from Iran, package it, and send it back. Such tools would help PNN in particular stay in touch with Iran, since the regime refuses to allow the network to establish an office or correspondent anywhere in the country.

As for the regime's signal-jamming efforts, the United States should work with its EU partners to ameliorate the problem. Such jamming violates agreements of the International Telecommunications Union, to which Iran is a party. In March 2010, the EU foreign ministers called for "defin[ing] and apply [ing] strong measures that may be implemented" if Tehran does not immediately end "this electronic interference," but little has happened since.

## Communication

Iranians also face many barriers to communicating among themselves, whether they wish to discuss what is happening in their country or what they should do about it. Currently, mobile phones, particularly text messaging, are the key mechanism for communication inside Iran.

The internet plays an important but more limited role: mobile phones are more crucial for communication within Iran, and satellite television is more crucial for information about what is going on inside the country. Approximately 23 million Iranians are internet users -- only 30 percent of the population. The other 70 percent are put off by the cost of access, language issues, and lack of interest. For this large group, the key way to get a message across online is to make it completely accessible in Persian (including the website interface), offer it at low cost, and package news/politics within an entertainment context.

Yet it is unrealistic to expect that private U.S. firms are going to take the lead in making internet software available to Iranians for low or no cost unless the U.S. government actively encourages such actions, including through vigorous outreach to companies and concerned nongovernmental organizations as well as quick responses to queries and requests for sanctions waivers. Given that U.S. companies are unlikely to make money from Iranian internet users, only limited constituencies within any given software firm will care much about helping Iranians. Others may be cautious about running afoul of U.S. sanctions, especially given how vigorously Washington has enforced restrictions and warned companies about the reputational risk if their products are found to have been misused. Consequently, the onus is on the U.S. government to take the lead rather than waiting for firms and NGOs to come to them.

For most existing internet users in Iran, the principal obstacles to fuller access are government censorship and slow speed. About one million Iranians, or five percent of internet users, employ some form of circumvention software to defeat censorship. Such software is not easy to use or readily available, however -- a problem that is unlikely to be

solved soon even with the increased effort the U.S. government has announced it is directing to this issue. Indeed, there is no magic wand to be waved over all of the communication problems. A variety of approaches should be pursued simultaneously, with a realistic understanding that each one will have drawbacks, including some risks for the users. To demand otherwise would be to block achievable progress, however incomplete.

## Declaration and Delegitimization

**D**espite the controversy among Iranian activists regarding some types of foreign support for their efforts, one finds broad consensus that declarations by governments and human rights organizations have never been harmful to the victims of abuses, and were often helpful to them. In fact, one common complaint from Iranian human rights and democratic activists is that such declarations are not sufficiently persistent. Activists have also called for statements addressing a wider range of issues, including the rights of women, children, ethno-religious minorities, workers' unions, and immigrants (Iran has more than a million Afghan and Arab immigrants), especially outside the big cities. A good step in this direction was Obama citing five cases of abuse on different grounds, from filmmaking to religious persecution.

The human rights message is more effective when coming from a wide array of sources. To date, Canada and Europe have taken the lead, raising concerns in a variety of international forums about Iran's many violations of international agreements it has signed. The United States should work with both parties in delegitimizing the Islamic Republic, naming and shaming the regime in every statement about how the international community will not stand idly by while dictators massacre their own people.

These partners are already cooperating on a campaign to reinstate the UN Human Rights Council post of special rapporteur for Iran. The last such official, operating a decade ago, was effective at highlighting Iranian abuses. Currently, the U.S. government has sanctioned eight Iranian officials involved in such abuses, while the European Union has designated eighty officials whom it is considering sanctioning. Washington and Brussels could integrate their efforts, sharing information about individuals and cultural or commercial institutions in Europe, Canada, and the United States that are run by Iranians actively involved in abuses.

## Conclusion

**A**ny U.S. government successes at increasing sanctions pressure on Iran have come from persistence and creativity, with Washington leveraging its influence by working with the private sector and persuading other countries to take a stand. That same approach needs to be more vigorously applied to support for human rights and democracy activists in Iran. Rather than bemoaning how little the U.S. government can do, Washington should work steadily on all the available fronts. European public opinion is particularly focused on the regime's human rights violations, creating an excellent atmosphere for international cooperation on a wide range of measures to support democratic forces and call attention to abuses.

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