

America and the Iranian Political Reform Movement: First, Do No Harm

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Articles & Testimony

On February 3, 2010, Institute senior fellow Mehdi Khalaji and Keston Family fellow J. Scott Carpenter, director of the Institute's [Project Fikra \(template102.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#), testified before the [House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia](#) (http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1148) on ways the United States can best support the movement for political reform in Iran. The following are their prepared remarks.

Mehdi Khalaji

The current democratic movement in Iran, which began after the rigged presidential election in June 2009, is a nonviolent movement that aims to rely on itself without asking for foreign help. The people involved in this movement believe that democracy is not a gift that can be received by others, but rather an internal effort of a people to emancipate itself from tyranny and realize its dream of justice, freedom and national sovereignty. The Iranian people appreciate President Barak Obama's policy of not intervening in Iranian political affairs and allowing them to manage their way toward democracy. Therefore, any policy toward Iran should be chosen in a prudent and cautious way that would not affect the democratic movement in a negative manner.

My experience with political activists who are involved in the Green movement is that they do not expect any direct help from the United States or any other foreign power. But a close look at the Iranian situation reveals that in this specific historical moment the interest of the international community and the democratic interests of Iranians are in confluence. To be sure, the focus of the international community is on the Iranian nuclear program, while the main preoccupation of the Iranian people is securing basic political and human rights and integrating the country into the international community. However, peace in the region and democracy in Iran now seem to be inseparable, because the same forces that threaten the peace are the same powers in Iran who threaten democracy and run the repressive machinery against the Iranian people.

The threat to regional peace and Iranian democracy are the same: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is not only the main body in charge of the Iranian nuclear program, but also is the most effective means for political suppression in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's leader and commander-in-chief. The Islamic Republic is nothing but an economic-religious-military complex that applies its coercive power not through political institutions but through a military and security apparatus under the direct supervision of Ayatollah Khamenei. His religious authority is contested by the clerical establishment. The only power base he has is within the military and security community of the country. Khamenei has lost much of his political and religious legitimacy, and without the military and especially the IRGC, he would have no real power.

Since coming to power, Ayatollah Khamenei has never given an interview to the media. He does not feel any sense of responsibility to the

people, deriving his power from Iran's oil income. In practice, he is accountable before nobody, despite the constitutional provision for an Assembly of Experts to supervise his leadership, because he vets who can run for that Assembly. He directly controls dozens of foundations that own some of the wealthiest companies in Iran and is not accountable before the parliament or the government. And the IRGC -- whose commanders he appoints -- and its affiliates control one-third of Iran's national income, dominating construction, oil field services, and telecommunications, among other industries.

In order to stop Iran's suspicious nuclear activities, the international community needs to apply pressure on the IRGC, which not only threatens the region through a suspicious nuclear program, but is using the Qods Force, asymmetrical warfare, and support for extremist groups to try to weaken Sunni allies of the West and sabotage the Arab-Israeli peace process and the budding democratic process in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Democracy and peace can be achieved through weakening the military government in Tehran and pressuring the IRGC. The two parallel tracks -- the international community's effort for peace and the Iranian people's democratic movement -- naturally reinforce each other, because they fight with the same enemy. Therefore, the main mechanism for supporting the democratic movement in Iran is to target the financial and military capabilities of the IRGC. A more powerful IRGC will result in a more militarized government, and a more militarized government is more likely to militarize the nuclear program for dangerous purposes. The real change in Iran is not a formal shift in the facade of the political structure. The change happens when civilians who think of Iran's national interest rather than ideological ambitions take power and push the fundamentalist military out of the economic and political spheres.

Another important step the West can take to help the democratic movement is to help Iranians connect with the outside world. Khamenei often expresses his belief that he is in a soft war with the West. For him, all new telecommunication, internet and satellite technology are Western tools to defeat him in this war. All bloggers, human rights and female activists, artists and writers, journalists and students -- even clerics who criticize him -- are unpaid Western soldiers in this war. Even the teaching of humanities is a part of the Western soft-war arsenal, which is why he has suggested closing all university humanities departments. The Iranian regime annually spends billions of dollars to jam TV and radio transmissions, filter the internet, censor all Western cultural products, listen in on phone conversations, and interrogate artists, writers and university professors who travel to the West for cultural festivals or conferences. Khamenei cannot govern in an Iran opened to the world. He prefers to govern a large prison-like Iran in which Iranians are disconnected from the world outside.

Putting cracks in the wall of this prison -- opening Iran to the world -- would be a great help to the democratic movement in Iran. The United States has made many efforts in this regard but still could do more. The major internet companies in the West could work with activists to find ways to bypass Iran's internet censors. Companies that provide Iran with the technology of surveillance and suppression should be named and shamed; consumers should shy away from these companies' products, and governments should urge these companies to reconsider their practices. Iran should not be able to use modern technology for fundamentalist and totalitarian purposes. It is outrageous that Iranian state television is allowed to transmit on the EUTELSAT Hotbird satellites (run by France) when Iranian jamming of Hotbird satellites has been so powerful that other customers demanded that EUTELSAT kick the BBC and VOA off the satellites -- which to its shame EUTELSAT did -- before later adding these services back. Iran's violation of its international commitments about not interfering with satellite transmissions should be vigorously pursued at the International Telecommunications Union. As a customer through its role with the VOA, the U.S. government should demand EUTELSAT throw Iranian state television off Hotbird, not VOA. New measures and mechanisms are needed to stop Iran from breaking international law.

Furthermore, because Iran's leaders are afraid of any contact between Iranians and the world outside, the international community, including European countries and the United States, should facilitate the visa process for ordinary Iranian citizens so that they can readily travel abroad. Direct contact between Iranians and the rest of the world is an important tool for dismantling the regime's propaganda against Western liberal democratic values, and is a major antidote to reactionary anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments.

And finally the United States should make a distinction between human rights issues and democracy. The Iranian people need the international community's support on human rights. Many officials who are involved in human rights abuses are affiliated with the IRGC and close to the team that runs the nuclear program. For instance, General Mohammad Reza Naqdi is the commander of the Basij militia and also on the UN blacklist. Twelve years ago, he was convicted in a Tehran court to three months prison for his involvement in torture of prisoners. He was also involved in crackdowns on students during the student movement a decade ago. Human rights are abused mostly by IRGC and security officers involved in the nuclear program. Therefore, supporting human rights in Iran and pressuring its violators is not only a moral cause, but should be a strategic long-term policy for the United States. The Iranian people, under a democratic government, can be a reliable partner for building regional peace in the Middle East and an example for other Islamic countries in their path toward democracy.

J. Scott Carpenter

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Barton, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the timely opportunity to testify before you on what the United States could be and should be doing to support the Iranian opposition.

For most of its history the United States has sought to support freedom and opportunity abroad. This persistent insistence has been born out of both principle and experience, knowing that free peoples, properly concerned with their own hopes and dreams, tend not to be enemies and, indeed, often become partners.

Today, as we come together to apply this principle to Iran, the subcommittee sounds a note of caution urging us to first do no harm. In my experience, however, working on the inside at the State Department, both as a deputy assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor and then in the Bureau for Near East Affairs, this seemingly appropriate, balanced tone often becomes an excuse for hand-wringing and paralysis. Creativity and willingness to take a modicum of risk are suborned by the simple phrase uttered all too often: "We have to be sure that whatever we do does not put them at greater risk." Thus do diplomats and bureaucrats convince themselves not to help Zimbabwean labor activists, Egyptian bloggers, and Chinese civil rights lawyers.

For this reason I tend to take my cue from the activists themselves, choosing to make available whatever assistance the United States has to offer and allowing those in the trenches fighting for their lives to decide whether and how to accept it. They surely know better than we the risks they are prepared to take for their freedom. The U.S. government's responsibility therefore should be to make a clear offer of support. In the case of Iran's Green Movement, so much more.

Iran's broad-based if loosely lined protest movement poses the first serious challenge to the Islamic Republic, shaking it to its core. This movement represents the latest iteration of a century-long effort to forge a constitutional republic based on pluralism and democracy. Since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, this drive has been thwarted first by monarchs and later by theocrats often aided and abetted by outside powers, including the United States.

The Islamic regime has demonstrated its resolve and determination to stay in power by unleashing waves of violence against its own people. Executions, especially against young people, are on the rise. And yet in the face of such violence, people in the streets are calling on the Obama administration and the American people to support them. Demonstrators in November chanted, "Obama, are you with us or are you with them?" We would be foolish to think they were asking this rhetorically. As several Iranian Americans have noted, the goal of protestors holding signs in English was not simply to show off linguistic ability.

Given our principles and their call for support, it is critical that the United States avail itself of this opportunity -- and responsibility -- to get it right. Too often when it comes to the people of Iran we have come down on the wrong side of history.

We got it wrong in 1953 when we joined with the British to overthrow the popularly elected Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq. We got it wrong again in the period leading up to the revolution in 1979. In the decade or so prior we ignored the warning signs and failed to press the shah to liberalize politically as he liberalized economically. We ignored his excesses and human rights abuses and agreed to his demand that we not work with anyone in the opposition. In the process we failed to nurture currents in society that might have played a moderating role, possibly averting the political upheaval that followed. Ultimately we reaped the whirlwind of our policies: a broad-based democratic revolution took place which was then subverted by Islamist radicals who remain with us today.

Our unconditional support for dictatorship in Iran has created deep ambivalence among Iranians toward the United States. Since the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, Iranians have been involved in a struggle to give democratic voice to one of the great civilizations only to find themselves thwarted by visionless monarchs or power-hungry theocrats. Washington consistently has come down on the wrong side. Today, on the eve of another anniversary of the revolution and at a time when the theocrats are being challenged in unprecedented ways by their own people, we should get it right. As one Green Movement activist put it to me recently, "If the U.S. thought relations between the United States and Iran were strained after the Mossadeq coup, just wait until Washington betrays the Green Movement."

So what should the United States do? It is time for the Obama administration to launch a nuanced, if comprehensive, offensive to challenge the regime on human rights grounds, confident that it is following, not leading, the Iranian people who are risking their lives to create a new future in Iran. Should the Green Movement succeed, a fundamental reorientation of the regime may be possible, with positive implications for the core American interest of avoiding a nuclear Iran.

Belatedly, the administration has been paying more attention -- at least rhetorically -- to the critical role the United States plays in democracy and human rights. As Secretary Clinton said at Georgetown University on December 14, 2009, "To fulfill their potential, people must be free to choose laws and leaders; to share and access information, to speak, criticize and debate. They must be free to worship, associate, and to love in the way that they choose. And they must be free to pursue the dignity that comes with self-improvement and self-reliance, to build their minds and their skills, to bring their goods to the marketplace, and participate in the process of innovation. Human rights have both negative and positive requirements. People should be free from tyranny in whatever form, and they should also be free to seize the opportunities of a full life. That is why supporting democracy and fostering development are cornerstones of our twenty-first-century human rights agenda. This administration, like others before us, will promote, support, and defend democracy."

The challenge for the Obama administration is to take these words and make them real.

My specific recommendations largely fall into three categories: public diplomatic statements and actions; re-engineered and re-emphasized programming; and punitive sanctions.

A public-diplomacy offensive. Recently, the Obama administration has sought to leaven its outreach policy with references to human rights. Yet it has done so only half-heartedly, and only after reassuring Tehran that it remains open to continued negotiations. This bifurcation of policy may once have produced results, but not in the post-June 12 context. At present, the regime is too nervous about its survival to catch the nuance or to care. It welcomes the continued open door, but rejects any interference in its domestic affairs even while it excoriates the United States for plotting its overthrow. Worse, the "we're with you but open to negotiations with your government" message is too easily misunderstood by the Iranian people, who are becoming increasingly resentful of American equivocation. In October, an Iranian cartoonist depicted President Obama covering his eyes while shaking hands with Ahmadinezhad who, in turn, tramples bloodied individuals. Clearly, it is time to get the rhetoric right.

To begin with, future policy actions must be set squarely within the context of the administration's human rights concerns. If the United States imposes targeted or even more broad-based sanctions, it should link such action to the IRGC/Basij violations of human rights since June 12, for instance. Sanctions taken at the UN would, of course, remain oriented toward stopping Iran's nuclear program, but the way in which the United States explains them would change. This message should be conveyed first and foremost by the president, but also by key members of his administration, who should all be made routinely available to the BBC Persian Service and Radio Farda to explain U.S. policy.

Additionally, the United States should seek to expropriate the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic that has successfully portrayed itself as a victim of the United States for the past thirty-one years. After June 12, the power of the government's "Great Satan" rhetoric rings hollow to most Iranians. Playing on Iranian psychology, the Obama administration should now attempt to invert this relationship by portraying itself as the victim of regime dissimulation. The message is a simple one: "The deal that was proposed in Geneva would have given Iran everything it wanted. Clearly the United States was prepared to compromise its principles to achieve an agreement, but we can only go so far. We cannot sacrifice our human rights principles to achieve a deal while the regime kills and tortures its own citizens."

The administration should also make it known publicly that it is currently planning for the eventuality of a democratic government coming to power in Tehran by preparing the necessary legal groundwork to lift sanctions and remove Iran from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. It should articulate the benefits that would flow from such steps, while also making clear that the process will take time. This would have the twin benefits of making clear that the current regime is not democratic while helping to set expectations in the event the regime actually did collapse.

The administration should publicly relaunch a revitalized Iran Democracy Fund and/or bolster the National Endowment for Democracy's ability to support democrats inside Iran and elsewhere. As you know, the administration has renamed the program the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) Fund and has de-funded a number of prominent grantees, including the Yale Human Rights Documentation Center. What's more concerning to me, however, are those groups who until their funds were cut off were providing a much needed lifeline to those inside Iran. For instance, I recently received a desperate email from a former grant recipient based in Europe who works to get news into and out of Iran. In the email he begged for more assistance as his organization sought to accommodate fleeing journalists from Iran to enlist them in the struggle. The State Department, he reported, was cutting their funding. Such actions send powerfully negative messages to those our rhetoric of solidarity is meant to reassure. Along these lines, the White House should strongly consider having the president give a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy echoing President Reagan's original speech in Westminster in 1982, but this time focused on Iran and the democratic aspirations of its people.

Critical in the medium term is to do something dramatic to improve what should be America's preeminent vehicle for communicating with the Iranian people: the Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN). Poorly managed by people who do not know Iran or its politics, PNN's journalistic professionalism currently meets only minimal standards. Most of VOA's 200 employees lack any television experience beyond what they have gained at VOA, for example. Its lack of a proper editorial board makes for poor priority setting, robbing PNN of impact. To cite just one example, on the day after the death of Ayatollah Montazeri, when the BBC Persian Service was blanketing Iranian airwaves with coverage similar to that given in the United States to pop star Michael Jackson's passing last summer, PNN was airing documentaries on global warming. Indicative of its lack of impact is the fact that Khamenei rails against the BBC Persian Service but rarely mentions VOA. The Obama administration should work urgently with the Broadcasting Board of Governors to appoint a director who knows broadcasting, speaks Farsi, knows both American and Iranian politics, and who can retool the organization to meet its congressional mandate. This is not as hard as it sounds.

While the VOA is being fixed, mechanisms should be found to create a communications platform for the opposition so that it can get its message out. Similar, if sensitive, programs exist to support independent terrestrial and satellite radio stations targeting Syria, for instance. Other examples abound in the past, including U.S. support for Serbian opposition radio. This requires some risk-taking but would not require centralization and for the moment would be simply encouraging the State Department to continue ongoing efforts rather than

dropping them.

Seeing sanctions straight. The administration should move forward expeditiously on targeted sanctions against IRGC leadership and companies, but not in the typical incremental manner. Doing so only allows for regime elements to develop strategies to avoid the impact of the proposed measures, and robs the individual announcements of their strategic communications impact. Reportedly, the administration has used the past year of "engagement" to devote considerable time and effort to identify the economic underpinnings of the IRGC.[1] If true, the time to act is now. It should execute all prospective "targeted sanctions" at the same time as a single tidal wave to boost their intended effectiveness and strengthen their political impact inside Iran.

Targeted sanctions should be combined with the threat of a gasoline embargo -- or even the embargo itself. The regime pretends not to care about gasoline sanctions, but adding this measure to the U.S. arsenal would increase pressure on regime hardliners, giving them something more to worry about and the opposition something additional to blame them for. It is true that since 2007 the regime has recognized its strategic vulnerability and has taken steps to reduce it. Nonetheless, the current political unrest and cold winter creates a propitious moment for the president to encourage passage in the Senate of the companion bill to the House's already passed Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA), which would give him the power to initiate such a ban. But here too, any sanctions or threat of sanctions imposed should be initiated because of the regime's human rights violations.

Stiffening Europe's resolve. As human rights abuses in Iran have mounted and Stalinesque show trials have continued, European populations have become increasingly outraged, putting pressure on their leaders to do something. This has created a shift in official opinion, rhetoric and, occasionally, policy. The Netherlands, for instance, recently joined the United States in listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization, and the European Commission is reportedly in the process of identifying possible sanctions against Iran.[2]

The Obama administration should create momentum for this shift in attitude by indicating its strong, public support for such initiatives. It should also encourage each European capital to echo its statements on human rights. Although Brussels may yet prove to be a weak reed, London, Paris, and Berlin have never been as close to taking real action against Iran as they are now. Moreover, President Obama remains personally popular in Europe and could use this popularity to good effect by making a public plea on human rights grounds. Without American leadership, however, Europe is not likely to find the will to act. Given that Europe, rather than the United States, holds the economic leverage vis-a-vis Iran, failing to do so would represent another enormous missed opportunity.

Shifting gears. In the very near term, given the determination of hardliners to use force against the people, a democratic breakthrough in Iran remains unlikely. Yet the violence the regime is currently employing is radicalizing those in the streets, and making the Green Movement's putative leadership less inclined to compromise. Proof of this hardening of positions was evident in the recent manifesto issued by exiled intellectuals known to be close to the internal Green Movement leadership, which demands the immediate resignation of President Ahmadinezhad as a precondition for talks.[3]

The regime, in other words, is vulnerable. As President Obama's dream of negotiating a nuclear deal fades, the prospects for confronting the regime by expressing solidarity with the aspirations of the Iranian people have increased. Doing so will reinforce the regime's paranoia and may yet tip the balance in favor of those committed to reshaping or even overthrowing it. A change in regime provides the best safeguard against a nuclear Iran and may even usher in a period of U.S.-Iranian partnership that could radically impact U.S. efforts to stabilize both Iraq and Afghanistan. Engagement as a policy has failed; it is now time to unequivocally challenge the regime on human rights.

Notes

[1] Michael Hirsch and Michael Isikoff, "Obama's Enforcer," Newsweek, December 12, 2009.

[2] Ilan Berman, "Toughen Up on Iran," Forbes.com, December 11, 2009, [link \(http://www.forbes.com/2009/12/11/iran-america-politics-washington-opinions-contributors-ilan-berman.html\)](http://www.forbes.com/2009/12/11/iran-america-politics-washington-opinions-contributors-ilan-berman.html).

[3] Robin Wright, "Abdolkarim Soroush on the Goals of Iran's Green Movement," Huffington Post, January 7, 2010, [link \(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-wright/abdolkarim-soroush-on-the_b_414882.html\)](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-wright/abdolkarim-soroush-on-the_b_414882.html). ❖

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