



Iran: A Call for Change

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On October 17, 2009, Ataollah Mohajerani addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Ataollah Mohajerani has played a central leadership role in the Islamic Republic of Iran, serving as President Muhammad Khatami's minister of culture and Islamic guidance and as President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's vice president for parliamentary affairs. A native of Arak, he currently resides in London and is a leading figure in the Iranian reform movement.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The government of Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad -- who is not the legitimate president of Iran -- continues to engage in adventurism and sensationalism on almost every issue it confronts, from the nuclear impasse to the Holocaust. Millions of people lost their lives in the Holocaust, and the lack of information about some of these victims does not diminish the gravity of the event. Besides, even if just one Jewish child had been burned or killed, it would have been a catastrophe. The relevant question, then, is the one posed by novelist and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel: how is it that a victim sometimes becomes a victimizer?

This question must be addressed from a human perspective, as must the question of nuclear weapons. The production or use of such weapons should be opposed from this universal perspective, as well as from an Iranian cultural and Muslim perspective. For example, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri -- recognized by some as the spiritual leader of Iran's new opposition, the Green Movement -- recently declared that Islam does not allow for access to weapons of mass destruction.

The Green Movement emerged from more than a century of efforts by the Iranian people to achieve democracy, freedom, and justice. Representing a spectrum of different ideas and aspirations, it is a national, long-term movement, and it needs more time to grow. Indeed, its struggle will be more like a marathon than a 100-meter race. It is a struggle in which generations will take part, and it has no expectations in the short term.

As President Barack Obama stated during his September 24, 2009, remarks at the United Nations, democracy cannot be imposed on a country from outside. Rather, a nation must choose democracy for itself. Accordingly, the Green Movement does not ask the United States or the international community for direct support -- it asks only that they not impede its growth. Psalm 69 says, "In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The Green Movement does not wish to be put in such an unpalatable predicament, whether in the form of military action, further sanctions, or appeasement of the illegitimate government in Tehran.

More specifically, most of the movement's leadership -- including Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, and Muhammad Khatami -- agree that a foreign military strike would have negative consequences, such as weakening the pro-democracy movement and strengthening the current government and military intelligence apparatus. The Iranian people -- who have a 6,000-year history -- would not view a foreign attack on their territory as a deserved blow against the regime's illegal leader, Ahmadinezhad. They would regard it as an assault on their national sovereignty and unity. In fact, most Iranians, even in the Green Movement, would rally around the regime. U.S. leaders should therefore stop using phrases like "all options are on the table," because force is not a solution.

Likewise, increased sanctions and economic pressures would not resolve the diplomatic crisis or help the pro-democracy faction. To succeed, the Green Movement requires a strong middle class based on industry, trade, and other sectors. Further sanctions would weaken those sectors and give the regime the upper hand in the economic debate. More broadly, they would rob the Iranian people of the historic opportunity for change that has emerged since June.

Instead of military force or sanctions, the United States should proceed with dialogue to end the standoff with Iran and reach a detente. Even the Green Movement supports this approach, despite not recognizing the government's legitimacy. Currently, the P5+1 nations -- that is, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany -- are negotiating with Iran, and some have suggested that they wait until after the Green Movement's outcome has been determined before reaching an agreement. This, however, is an unrealistic proposal. The Green Movement therefore supports talks between the United States and the current government.

At the same time, the United States should not negotiate terms with Tehran that favor U.S. interests but harm the Iranian people's long-term democratic aspirations. Many in the Middle East believe that the United States does not want powerful, democratic, sovereign nations in the region because such states make it more difficult for Washington to achieve its objectives. President Obama must change this perception. Moreover, some Iranians worry that the current U.S. administration would be willing to fully support Ahmadinezhad's government even if it completely lacked legitimacy. For example, on June 15, 2009 -- the same day that three million people walked from Imam Hussein Square to Azadi Square in Tehran to protest Ahmadinezhad's reelection -- U.S. authorities in Irbil, Iraq, released several Iranian officials who had been detained for alleged ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force. Many Iranians viewed this as a conciliatory gesture to Ahmadinezhad. Similarly, the recent U.S.-Iranian talks in Geneva have been viewed as a greeting card to Tehran.

In light of these issues, the United States would be wise to look at the lessons of history. For example, the year 1953 was a pivotal time in many countries. In the Soviet Union, it was the year Stalin died; in Yugoslavia, it was the year Tito came to power; and in the United States, it was the year Truman announced the development of the hydrogen bomb. For Iranians, 1953 is full of meaning because it was the year the nation's aspirations for freedom and democracy were crushed by a coup.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once stated that America must be "the great arsenal of democracy." Yet thirteen years after that declaration, Iran succumbed to a coup against its national government. The two decades following that event were a very sad period for the country, during which the United States never stood up for Iranian democracy or the rule of law. Had the national movement not been crushed in 1953, Iran would surely have had a different fate -- there would not have been a need for the Islamic Revolution that has created so many problems since 1979. U.S. policymakers should learn from this history -- they should not make concessions to the current government in Iran. If they do, future generations of Iranians will remember how the United States once again disserved the interests of the Iranian people. ❖



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