

Regime Change is Dead. Long Live Regime Change

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Articles & Testimony

Despite Iran's disappointing response this week to the international call for negotiations on its nuclear program, the Barack Obama administration continues to hold out hope that some combination of inducements and further pressures will persuade the Islamic Republic to abandon its quest for the bomb. But the fact is that a central, but unspoken element of President Obama's strategy for securing a deal -- his readiness to acknowledge the legitimacy and permanency of the Iranian regime -- has been severely undercut by Iran's post-election turmoil.

Obama entered office determined to re-energize diplomacy by reversing the George W. Bush administration's "axis of evil" approach. From the moment of his inauguration, the president offered Iran's rulers an "open hand," pledging to engage them on the basis of "mutual interest and mutual respect." He dropped the long-standing U.S. demand that linked negotiations to Iran's compliance with U.N. resolutions requiring suspension of its uranium enrichment program. Instead, he proposed an unconditional dialogue to address outstanding problems -- even as Iran's production of enriched uranium continued apace.

Perhaps most significantly, as a key pillar in his effort to win over Iran's leadership, Obama also seemed prepared to assuage the regime's greatest fear: its lack of legitimacy in the eyes of its own people. For years, Iran's rulers have viewed a U.S.-backed rebellion, or "velvet revolution," as the most serious threat to their survival. Iranian officials regularly charged the Bush administration, with its harsh rhetoric but modest democracy promotion efforts, with fomenting regime change.

Obama moved quickly to take regime change off the table. Focused on the priority of stopping Iran's nuclear progress, and assuming (quite mistakenly) that Iran's theocracy was solidly entrenched, Obama signaled early on that the Islamic Republic's legitimacy was not at issue in his eyes and Iran's internal affairs not a matter of U.S. concern.

Already the president is said to have dispatched two private messages to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, assuring him of America's desire to achieve a historic accommodation between Washington and Tehran. Publicly, evidence of the shift in U.S. approach was perhaps on starkest display in the president's March message on the occasion of the Persian new year. Whereas similar statements by President Bush addressed only the Iranian people, President Obama made a point of speaking in respectful tones to Iran's leaders as well. While Bush dwelled on the regime's brutality against its own citizens, Obama failed to even mention human rights. And where Bush derisively questioned the legitimacy of Iran's "unelected rulers," Obama stressed his desire to see "the Islamic Republic of Iran ... take its rightful place in the community of nations."

Of course, providing assurances to unsavory regimes about the United States' benign intentions toward their longevity is nothing particularly novel, especially as part of a quid pro quo to achieve what are judged to be more important U.S. objectives. Indeed, there's already precedent in Iran's case. In 1981, as part of the Algiers accords that ended the Iranian hostage crisis, the Jimmy Carter administration pledged "that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs."

And who can doubt that, before surrendering his weapons of mass destruction in 2003, Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi first made sure that George W. Bush would not inflict on him the same fate as Saddam Hussein?

Yet however meritorious a strategy premised on reconciling America, once and for all, with Iran's revolutionary theocracy may have appeared in the abstract several months ago, it has been thrown into serious doubt by the reality of Iran's post-election tumult. Having rigged the vote, the regime has cracked down viciously on protesters, sadistically abused prisoners, and staged a series of grotesque show trials. Despite widespread repression, challenges to the theocracy's core tenets continue to mount week after week, as do the chants of "Death to the dictator!" The regime's legitimacy lies in tatters, its fragility exposed, the prospect of its eventual collapse never more real.

It is ironic, of course, that just as the Obama administration seemed prepared to write off regime change forever, the Iranian people have made it a distinct possibility. It would be tragic indeed if the United States took steps to bolster the staying power of Iran's dictatorship at precisely the moment when so many Iranians appear prepared to risk everything to be rid of it. It would also seem strategically shortsighted to risk throwing this regime a lifeline, because nothing seems more likely to enhance the prospects for peacefully resolving the nuclear issue than the Islamic Republic's replacement by a more democratic government. Finally, at a practical level, it seems unlikely that Iran's rulers would today find much solace in yet another U.S. assurance to steer clear of their internal affairs. They are living their worst nightmare and seem convinced that Washington's hand lies behind it.

Persuading Iran's paranoid, anti-American theocrats to forego nuclear weapons was always going to be a long shot. Iran's ongoing political crisis has made that task even harder. But it may also have created the most promising chance yet for addressing the Iranian nuclear threat short of war. However engagement now unfolds, Obama should do nothing to undermine this historic opportunity.

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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