

# Time to Get Serious about Helping Iran's Opposition

Sep 10, 2009



Articles & Testimony

**O**n Monday and Tuesday, Iranian police raided offices connected to top opposition leaders and former presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Many fear that the move signals that the regime's efforts to extinguish Iran's post-election unrest is moving to its next, perhaps decisive, phase: the arrest and decapitation of the opposition's leadership, first and foremost Mousavi and Karroubi themselves.

The Obama administration desperately needs to find its voice and rally the international community in an effort to deter the regime from taking this step. The courage that Mousavi and Karroubi have demonstrated in continuing to speak out forcefully -- not only against the government's falsifying election results, but about the brutality of its subsequent crackdown -- has been extraordinary. The fact is that the vast majority of Western observers expected these formerly loyal servants of the Revolution to fold up their tents long ago after being commanded to do so by Iran's supreme ruler, Ali Khamenei. That they did not wither, and on the contrary have only ratcheted up their attacks on the government's lack of legitimacy, has been absolutely essential to the opposition's ability to sustain itself for nearly three months -- and to pose, without question, the most potent threat ever to the Islamic Republic's survival.

One would think that by this time the Obama administration would have realized the extent to which U.S. national interests are bound up in the opposition's success. The chances that diplomacy will convince this Iranian regime to change course and truly abandon its nuclear ambitions seem next to nil. As if on cue, Ahmadinejad told us precisely that (yet again) this week, when he insisted that Iran would never halt its efforts to enrich uranium or negotiate its so-called "nuclear rights." That's likely true even if the West's hand is buttressed by the timely imposition of tougher sanctions -- a long shot, in any case, given persistent Russian and Chinese recalcitrance. Barring a minor miracle, then, the administration appears to be hurtling toward that fateful moment in time that Senator McCain crystallized so well during last year's campaign: The time when the world confronts the excruciating choice of "Iran with the bomb or bombing Iran."

But the point, of course, is that a minor miracle has already happened -- if only the administration would see it. The rise (and persistence) of a mass protest movement that has rocked the Iranian regime to its core, and is genuinely threatening its collapse, was forecast by almost no one, and certainly not the CIA. That movement's survival, strengthening, and eventual success has, in fact, today become the most viable option available for satisfactorily resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis short of war.

It's impossible not to suspect that the administration has viewed Iran's post-election turmoil as more an unwelcome complication than potential godsend. Its silence in the face of the stolen elections, the brutal crackdown, the rape and torture of detainees, and Stalinist show trials has been deafening. Its claim that speaking out more forcefully would be exploited by the regime as evidence of U.S. interference rings hollow in light of the fact that virtually not a day has passed since June 12 that the regime has not trumpeted that exact charge.

The fact is that the administration neither saw the protests coming, nor believed they would continue for more than a few days at most. All its energies -- indeed, its entire strategy with respect to Iran--has been premised on getting

the current regime into talks and negotiating some sort of deal, not responding to a mass movement demanding democracy, human rights and "Death to the Dictator." Central to that strategy has been the president's effort -- beginning the day of his inauguration--to reassure Iran's ruling theocrats and thugs of America's benign intentions toward their long-term survival and well-being. It's that effort, of course, that the administration no doubt worries might be jeopardized were it to stand up and rally the world on behalf of Iran's embattled democratic opposition.

One can only hope that the President is still capable of modifying his approach before the boom is lowered on Mousavi and Karroubi. It's possible, of course, that Iran's opposition is sufficiently institutionalized that it can survive their silencing. It's even possible that their arrest itself could prove the final spark that triggers the regime's denouement. But the history of headless revolutions is not a particularly promising one.

After this week's office raids, an Iranian human rights activist was quoted as saying that "The only thing that might stop [the regime from arresting Mousavi and Karroubi] is if they feel they cannot get away with it." Working with its allies, the United States needs to make clear now that the Islamic Republic will not get away cost-free if it moves against the opposition's top leaders. There's no guarantee that will successfully deter a frightened dictatorship that now clearly sees its possible demise on the horizon. But it's the right thing to do. It's also the smart thing -- if only the administration will see it.

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

Weekly Standard

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



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)

### TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)