

What Iran Has Been Doing While You Were Watching the Protests

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Articles & Testimony

While the remarkable turmoil in the aftermath of Iran's presidential election has captured the world's attention, other news relating to Iran has slipped by relatively unnoticed. Last week, the head of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency told Congress that Iran and North Korea were cooperating on ballistic missiles. Diplomats in Vienna told the press that Iran had denied an IAEA request to install additional monitoring cameras at the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, and IAEA director-general Mohammad ElBaradei asserted that Iran desires nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, two Hizballah operatives were reportedly arrested in Azerbaijan, bearing Iranian passports.

The juxtaposition of these activities with the ferment in the streets of Tehran reveals two altogether different Irans struggling with one another -- one marked by political dynamism and a hunger for justice, and another that is autocratic, bent on projecting power, and in which elected officials have little influence. To Iranians, this sort of conflict follows a familiar pattern in Iran's history. To Westerners, it has been eye-opening. What is surprising to outside observers is not that Iran's elections were rigged, but that their manipulation has elicited such a powerful response from the Iranian people.

While policymakers in the United States and elsewhere pin their hopes on the first, vibrant Iran, they must deal with the stark reality of the second, harsher one. This may explain the unusually cautious statements emanating from the White House, including President Obama's own statement to the effect that Ahmadinejad and his challengers are not much different as far as the United States is concerned. This begs the question: Upon which Iran should U.S. policy be focused? Can the United States successfully support freedom in Iran without endangering its "tough diplomacy" aimed at the Iranian nuclear threat?

In formulating an answer, it is important to note that prospects for U.S.-Iran engagement, never too great, have been diminished by the election and its aftermath. The Iranian regime's willingness to flout international opinion and the yearnings of its own people reveals either overconfidence or, conversely, serious insecurity. A cautious regime might see an opportunity in President Obama's offer of dialogue, but a regime that is either supremely confident or shakily insecure is unlikely to grasp Obama's outstretched hand. A confident regime is likely to dismiss the consequences of defiance, and an insecure one will see any opening to the West as a threat rather than a prize.

The results themselves suggest that engagement with the United States is not the regime's top priority. Whereas his challengers argued during their campaign for improving U.S.-Iran relations, Ahmadinejad heaped scorn on those who would pursue "detente" with the West. He was supported by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who pronounced himself "ideologically disinclined" toward U.S.-Iran reconciliation and urged Iranian voters to reject candidates who would reach out to Washington.

Nevertheless, whatever chances exist for successful engagement with the Iranian regime will not be dimmed by a vigorous defense of the rights of the Iranian people; rather, those prospects would paradoxically be enhanced. This crisis provides an opportunity to demonstrate to the regime that it will face multilateral penalties for flouting

international norms, a lesson clearly transferrable to the nuclear question. While our allies may vary in their views on the risks posed by Iran's nuclear program and the best way to deal with it, the regime's actions against its own people are drawing broad condemnation from across the world. If even this global outcry is not translated into concrete action, Iran's leaders will draw the lesson that the international community's resolve has dissipated and will act accordingly.

Furthermore, vigorously defending Iranians' rights, both now and in the context of any future dialogue with Iran, could enhance U.S. credibility inside Iran and boost support among Iranians for a compromise with the West.

Some have argued that Iranians will naturally resent any perceived involvement by foreign powers in their affairs, citing as an example the American-backed overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq in 1953. This reading of history strains credulity. Iranians' wariness of outside powers arises in large part from Western indifference to the oppression of Iranians and failure to support their struggle for justice, whether in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, or during the Mossadeq era. Iranians do not want outsiders, including the United States, to pick winners in their elections. But silence in the face of a violent crackdown in Iran would compound these historical errors, not reverse them.

Iran is a multifaceted nation which demands a multifaceted U.S. policy. A successful approach to Iran will require the United States to simultaneously confront head-on the challenges posed by both Irans evident today -- to support the first Iran, which is demanding justice, and to deter the second, determined to challenge international security. If we fail to do so, we will unwittingly be writing yet another tragic chapter in the troubled history of U.S.-Iran relations.

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