

Iran's Nuclear Program and Its Human Rights Record Are Closely Linked

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Iran's hardliners see their nuclear program and their repression as integrally linked: both are ways to combat Western arrogance seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic. For this reason, the West should tie its concern about Iran's nuclear standoff with the world community to an insistence that Iran respect the human rights treaties it has signed.

Why is Iran so unwilling to compromise about its nuclear activities? To answer that question requires understanding the mind of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- the chief decisionmaker in Iran. His main worry for more than a decade has been that the West is working to change Iran's regime. His concern is not invasion but instead a Western-inspired "velvet revolution" (See Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008). That phrase refers to the 1989 Czechoslovak overthrow of communist rule, in which the seemingly isolated intellectual dissident Vaclav Havel was quickly propelled to power. Khamenei worries that once-revolutionary regimes that appear to be solidly entrenched can be quickly overthrown if they have been undermined by civil society organizations and free media -- a process he calls "postmodern colonialism." His concern about this alleged Western strategy was reinforced first by how reformers' surprise 1997 victory in Iran's presidential election led to massive 1999 student anti-regime demonstrations, and then second by the "color" revolutions that led to the replacement of leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan -- countries close to Iran's borders.

Iran's clerical hardliners are paranoid about nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of all sorts, but especially those that promote people-to-people exchanges and the free flow of information. Consider the April 2009 warning from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps about a Dutch "media overthrow" project: "One such country, which has supported the opposition movement financially in recent years, is the Netherlands [whose "Dutch Project" is part of the] long-term and strategic planning along the ideology of NATO ... pursuing the agenda of global imperialism by absorbing vast capital, expert human resources and political networks, setting up a group of expert journalists from the domestic and foreign opposition with the help of the British, political and diplomatic support from the Dutch, and with planning and secret budgets from the United States." (See

http://www.roozonline.com/english/archives/2009/04/revelations_against_dutch_proj.html

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statement went on to give a long list of news-related NGOs and internet sites it said are receiving Dutch assistance for the "soft overthrow" of Iran's regime. As that example shows, Khamenei sees the West as a whole, and not just the United States, as promoting a velvet revolution.

The Iranian hardliners' complaints are directed at activities of civil-society groups, not just Western governments. Consider the expansive view by the Intelligence Ministry's counterespionage director, who is plotting against the Iranian government: "Any foreigner who establishes relations is not trustworthy. Through their approaches, they first establish an academic relationship but this soon changes into an intelligence relationship." (See Robert Tait, "Talk to Foreigners and We Will View You as a Spy, Iran Warns Academics," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2007) And these are not just empty words; university professors are being dismissed and physicians are being arrested because of their contacts with foreigners.

Supporting Iran's beleaguered human rights activists is not just a moral value but also a vital Western security interest. The *New York Times* has editorialized (on April 11, 2006), "The best hope for avoiding a nuclear-armed Iran lies in encouraging political evolution there over the next decade." Although a democratic Iran would almost certainly also be attracted by the perceived advantages of nuclear weapons, it would also be more sensitive to the high cost of the international isolation a nuclear-armed Iran would face -- a price that an Iran eager to reintegrate with the world may well not wish to pay. Even in the event that a democratic Iran decides to retain Iran's nuclear capabilities, a democratic Iran would be more likely to share the same strategic rationality as the West, and deterrence would therefore be a surer prospect.

The cause of reform in the region would suffer a grave additional setback if the West were perceived to have abandoned Iran's beleaguered pro-democratic forces by making a deal with hardline autocrats to secure geostrategic interests. Iranian reformers fear just such a deal. Noted dissident Akbar Ganji warned in his "Letter to America" (*Washington Post*, September 21, 2006), "We believe the government in Tehran is seeking a secret deal with the United States. It is willing to make any concession, provided that the United States promises to remain silent about the regime's repressive measures at home." Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi and Muhammad Sahimi urged "Link Human Rights to Iran's Nuclear Ambitions" in an article of that title (*New Perspectives Quarterly*, Spring 2006). Iran's leaders appear convinced that their nuclear program will force the West to treat them with respect -- by which they mean back off from criticizing the Islamic Republic, including its human rights record.

Doing a deal with Iran about its nuclear program is complicated not only by the human rights issue but also by the region's preoccupations. Middle East states worry that the West -- especially the United States -- may cut a deal which leaves Iran as the region's pre-eminent power. Gulf Arab leaders have told the Obama administration: engagement with Iran is fine, but please, no marriage. These concerns are misplaced because the United States, like the rest of the West, has many concerns outside the nuclear realm with the actions of the Islamic Republic, such as its support for terrorism -- and its human rights record. Restating the West's continuing concern about these issues will help assuage Middle East concern that the United States is prepared to see Iran exercise influence in ways that its neighbors are unwilling to accept.

A common front by influential members of the international community offers the best prospect of persuading Iran's leaders to compromise, and to do so in a way which reassures the region. Demonstrating how seriously the international community is concerned about Iran's actions is the best way to discourage would-be imitators of Iranian proliferation. Those who are most worried about the consequences if the confrontation with Iran escalates should be the strongest proponents of taking more vigorous action now to give diplomats more leverage in their negotiations -- that is, to make Iran's choices starker between what happens if it cooperates and what happens if it ignores the UN Security Council.

In closing, for moral and practical reasons, the international community should hope for change in Iran, but it would

be unwise to base policy on that hope. The policies of Western governments should be designed to live with a hostile regime that persists while preparing to take advantage of the opportunity if change occurs. ❖

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