

How We Can Bring Him Down

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Articles & Testimony

This week, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad again darkens the doorstep of America to address the United Nations. There he is likely to express outrage that New York refused his request to visit Ground Zero.

Like that visit would have been, his speech will be designed to divert attention from what may be the most urgent question facing the international community -- whether the apocalyptic leaders of the Islamic republic can be stopped from acquiring the nuclear weapons necessary to implement their pledge to wipe Israel off the map.

So far, the UN has proven to be its usual dysfunctional self. A strategy of compelling Iran to end its nuclear program by imposing broad-based sanctions has proved illusory. The Bush administration has repeatedly stated that no option is off the table -- including a military option -- but has given those words little content, instead stressing diplomacy as the only way forward. The result is that Ahmadinejad arrives in New York brimming with confidence that the West is busy negotiating with itself while his nuclear program proceeds undeterred.

But there are powerful reasons why he should be looking over his shoulder.

At home, trouble is brewing for Ahmadinejad. Despite record high oil prices, the ayatollahs who really run the show have so mismanaged their economy that they have been forced to import gasoline at huge cost. The result has been soaring inflation, which has most hurt the masses that the populist president said he was elected to help.

Labor strikes have swept the country; popular unrest is growing. Ahmadinejad has tried using genocidal threats against Israel to distract attention from a brutal crackdown he has launched against his many critics who thirst for change -- but the Iranian people, by and large, are too smart to buy it.

The Bush administration response to all of this has been remarkably muted. Throughout the recent detentions, beatings and arrests, neither the White House nor the State Department has mustered much protest. Nearly 10 weeks have gone by since the charismatic labor leader Mansour Osanlou was arrested -- with complete silence coming from both.

And when the Senate moved to cut two-thirds of the administration's already paltry request of \$75 million to support reformers in Iran, the administration didn't lift a finger to stop it. (Thankfully, a bipartisan coalition of outraged lawmakers, led by Sens. Joseph Lieberman and Sam Brownback, rescued the funding from the budget ax.)

Why the reticence? After all, if sanctions aren't working and a military option is not a live option (at least for now), it stands to reason the administration would at least strongly back the idea of supporting Iranian democrats working for peaceful change. But no -- even the "soft power" approach finds few adherents in Washington.

Absurdly, hand-wringers in Washington worry that pro-democracy funds jeopardize those they are meant to help, as if the crackdown taking place in Iran has nothing to do with the nature of the regime itself.

But it is not too late to change course. If the U.S. plays its hand effectively, we can weaken the tyrant of Tehran substantially -- and ideally empower his own people to effect peaceful change.

When he takes the UN rostrum, President Bush must place America firmly on the side of the Iranian people. He need

only recall his 2005 State of the Union address and promise actions to match those stirring words: "As the Iranian people struggle for their freedom, America will stand with them." Investing in the Iranian people -- now, while there is still time -- is the best way to effect peaceful change in Iran without resort to military force.

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