

U.S. Support for the Iranian Opposition

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Brief Analysis

Directly reaching the Iranian people can be achieved in two ways: (1) supporting political opposition groups that explicitly advocate regime change, and (2) empowering human rights and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that do not directly engage in political action but support issues such as women and children's rights, labor rights, and religious freedom. Although the latter groups do not pursue political goals, the Iranian regime considers them subversive entities seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic.

Status of the Opposition

Whether true or not, most Iranians believe that the United States overtly sponsors Iranian dissidents and opposition groups. The regime furthers this idea by suggesting that all internal political opposition is financed by the United States. At the same time, some opposition groups and individuals have overstated their relationship with Washington in order to bolster their credibility among politically frustrated Iranians and increase their leverage against the regime. The royalists, led by Reza Pahlavi, son of the late shah, are a prime example. A March 6, 2006, *New Yorker* article asserting that Pahlavi received CIA funding in the 1980s only strengthened the popular belief that his faction cannot act without substantial U.S. support.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, significant changes have occurred among exiled Iranian opposition groups. The first years following the revolution were dominated by pro-American royalists and pro-Marxist, anti-American leftists. The collapse of the Cold War order heralded a makeover in opposition-group ideology, however. In addition, following the failure of the reform movement in Iran, many political activists, journalists, and students fled the country. This wave of departures greatly affected the political makeup of the exile population, forcing activists to regroup and redefine their ideological frameworks. One result is the Berlin-based Union of Republicans, an international alliance of formerly left-leaning dissidents and secular nationalists.

The Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) is a political and military opposition organization that does not fit on the traditional political spectrum. During the Iran-Iraq War, it relocated to Iraq and supported Saddam Hussein against the Iranian regime through sabotage operations within Iran. Many believe that the MEK was funded and supported by the United States. Washington no longer supports the MEK, though its political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, is lobbying Congress to change the legal constraints that outlaw such funding. That the United States is supporting groups other than the royalists has become a widespread belief in the last decade, leading to much speculation.

U.S. Funding

Since the September 11 attacks, American diplomatic discourse on Iran has changed. In 2002, President Bush labeled Tehran part of the global "axis of evil" and advocated the need for change, while Congress allocated \$20 million to promote democracy in Iran. In 2006, the administration requested an additional \$75 million for democracy promotion, all the while insisting that it does not want regime change in Tehran, but rather "change in regime behavior." From this amount, \$36.1 million was allocated for Voice of America television and Radio Farda broadcasting. The remainder will be spent in Iran and abroad supporting NGOs and human rights organizations such as the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center in New Haven, Connecticut.

Some reports indicate that U.S. financial support is in fact aimed at regime change and goes beyond the allocated \$75 million. In May, ABC News reported that the CIA had hired Jundallah, a Pakistan-backed Baluchi group, to carry out sabotage operations inside Iran. (Later, ABC reported that President Bush had in fact authorized a covert CIA program against the regime.)

In addition to public and covert funding of Iranian opposition groups, the United States also supports individual dissidents through various means. On June 5, for example, President Bush met privately with two such dissidents during the Democracy and Security International Conference in Prague. These meetings might be seen as a means of granting legitimacy to individual dissidents such as Pahlavi and Amir Abbas Fakhraivar (who claimed leadership over Iranian student activists when in Iran).

Fakhraivar has an uncertain reputation among Iran-based activists for exaggerating his political power. In 2006, many former and current student activists such as Ahmad Batebi and Nasser Zarafshan publicly refuted Fakhraivar's claims about his background. Batebi, an acclaimed activist, remains in prison. Zarafshan -- a lawyer who represented the families of victims killed during the wave of "serial political murders" in November 1998, and who has himself spent five years in prison -- wrote a letter stating that Fakhraivar was a known Iranian intelligence asset and that other activists were trying to avoid him.

Despite its efforts, Washington has not assured Iranians of its intentions to support democracy. Although the United States seeks to amplify the voice of certain Iranian dissidents and ignite a democratic movement within the country, many Iranians assume that Washington actually aims to create an authoritarian pro-American puppet to supplant the current regime. Activists are concerned about the creation of an Iranian version of Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi. American support for controversial figures such as Fakhraivar could send the wrong message to the Iranian people and increase their suspicions.

Next Steps for the Opposition

If they hope to advance their democratic cause, Iranian activists must undertake two concrete steps: (1) delineate a clear ideology and strategic plan for change, and (2) acquire the necessary power to mobilize the masses. Since the Islamic Revolution, the regime has easily suppressed domestic opposition groups. Meanwhile, opposition elements outside Iran have lacked the ideology, strategic planning, consistency, organization, and pragmatism needed to reach the people. Indeed, Iranian opposition groups have had little or no positive, tangible impact on the process of democratization. Many exiled democrats are uncomfortable with the current political groups and, as a result, prefer to use blogs, websites, and the media to provide the Iranian people with information and analysis. Contrary to regime propaganda and conventional wisdom in Iran, most of these individuals are independent of any foreign government.

Conclusion

Even if there is little chance Iranian political opposition groups could come to power, American support of such groups can serve two goals: (1) collecting information about public opinion in Iran, and (2) seeking advice that could

help shape U.S. policy toward Iran. Problematically, these groups are often detached from the Iranian people. They do not represent any social group and are largely unable to influence constituencies within the country. As a result, they cannot provide the accurate information needed to fulfill U.S. goals. In fact, some Iranian dissident groups know less about Iran than American experts.

Moreover, U.S. support for political opposition groups could actually sabotage the democratization process in Iran. If the United States sides with discredited groups such as the royalists or illegitimate individuals, its image in Iran will be further damaged. Iranians expect the United States to be actively engaged in promoting human rights and democracy, but most are suspicious of foreign-funded actors. Both the Iranian people and political leadership are quite sensitive about their country's independence. Hence, U.S. funding of even legitimate groups can serve to discredit them.

The best way to credibly support and influence the Iranian people is to improve the quality of U.S.-funded Persian media, namely Voice of America television and Radio Farda. The United States can also promote human rights in Iran by making human rights a key issue in diplomatic efforts, the media, and NGOs. Finally, Washington can improve its standing with the Iranian people by streamlining the visa process for Iranian academics, artists, and students. This could have a tremendous effect on Iranian society, helping to spread liberal democratic values and fight the regime's anti-American propaganda.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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