

Iran's Myth of Moderation

Mar 18, 2002



Articles & Testimony

On March 13, a number of U.S. senators, policymakers, and professors gathered at a conference dedicated to criticizing George Bush's policy toward Iran. The annual American Iranian Council gala is subsidized by a dozen oil companies, and sponsored by those same universities -- Columbia and Georgetown -- whose faculty so prominently dismissed the threat posed by Islamist terror right up to the moment the first jetliner slammed into the World Trade Center.

The conference chided the Bush administration for setting back the cause of reform in Iran by labeling the Iranian government part of the "Axis of Evil." Indeed, conference honoree Sen. Chuck Hagel (R., Ne.) insisted on CNBC's *Hardball* last month that Bush's speech "made it more difficult for [Iranian President Muhammad] Khatami and the reformist forces in Iran."

But who exactly is Khatami? Upon his election, the *New York Times* declared that the new president was "dedicated to relaxing or eliminating political and religious repression." Columbia University professor Gary Sick called Khatami "a reformer with an outspoken commitment to civil society, social justice, the rule of law and expanded freedom." *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Robin Wright continues to label Khatami "the country's leading reformer."

Only one problem exists. Khatami is neither a reformer nor a democrat. It is true that Khatami beat three other candidates to win the presidency in 1997. But he emerged to victory only after the mullahs disqualified 234 other challengers whom they felt too reformist or too liberal. Khatami has not retracted his 1980 writings in the Iranian daily *Keyhan* in which he insisted that government was only for the clergy.

Many commentators base Khatami's reformist label upon his decade-long tenure as Minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture. While serving as the country's chief censor, Khatami did allow a number of books and magazines to come to print. But he was also directly responsible for the censorship of more than 600 other books -- not exactly the work of a true reformist.

Does Khatami respect human rights? According to the recently published memoirs of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, once the number-two man in the Islamic Republic, in 1988, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini ordered a purge of political prisoners. More than 3,000 were killed in the space of a week. As a member of the ruling council, Khatami had advance knowledge of the executions, but did nothing to counter the slaughter. Tellingly, Montazeri's memoirs are not available in Iran. Under Khatami's presidency, they remain censored.

While the Western press and many academics continue blindly to label Khatami a reformist, freedoms have actually declined in Iran under his administration. Khatami has failed to fulfill any campaign promises. Under Khatami, more than 50 newspapers have been banned. Rather than legalize satellite dishes, Khatami's government continues the ban and confiscate them. Last November, the Iranian government banned private Internet service providers. Unlimited freedom of communication remains dangerous for a regime that still tightly controls the media. In 1999, police and government-funded vigilantes attacked a University of Tehran dormitory, killing a number of unarmed students. No vigilantes have been charged with murder, yet scores of students remain in prison. Indeed, while

Senators Hagel, Biden, and Torrecelli call for renewed dialogue with Iran, 600,000 Iranians languish in some of the worst prison conditions in the world.

It is no accident that the Iranian people are not simply pro-Western, but overwhelmingly pro-American. After all, while the United States has stood on principle, the European Union has for a decade engaged in dialogue with Iran. The results? Dissidents assassinated in Vienna and Berlin, truck bombings in Saudi Arabia, intellectuals and writers murdered in Tehran, Christians and Bahais killed because of their religion. Perhaps the 13 Jews imprisoned in 2000 should count themselves fortunate. Dialogue has a decade-long record of failure, unless support for Hamas and Hizbullah are signs of success.

It should not come as a surprise that reformist students last December heckled their president during a University of Tehran appearance, chanting, "Khatami, Khatami, Honesty, Honesty," and "Enough slogans! Why no action?" Iranians recognize that Khatami has been a fraud, striving not for real reform, but rather for diplomatic space to carry on business as usual. It is curious that America's so-called experts would urge Washington to engage with an increasingly unpopular regime. ❖

National Review Online

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)