

## Sidebar:

### Iran's Upheaval

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Articles & Testimony

The following is a sidebar to Dr. Satloff's article "[The Next Turbulent Zone.](#)" ([templateC06.php?CID=633](#))

Iran's great internal debate over its future, as evidenced in recent confrontations between demonstrating students and police, is likely to sharpen and deepen in the next five years. The two protagonists here are not, as often reported, the popularly elected progressive President Mohammed Khatami and the conservative Islamic Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i. Rather, the competing forces are the atavistic advocates of continued clerical rule and reformists who favor a clear separation between clerical and political authorities. Khatami, contrary to Western belief, remains a devotee of the theistic state, though one with a human face.

Because this is an internal contest for the future of Iran, Washington should be modest about its role in determining the outcome. Nevertheless, we have a strong interest in the success of the anti-clerical forces. They are the overwhelming majority of the people--the 70 percent of the Iranian electorate who thronged to the polls in 1997 to vote for Khatami because he was the least objectionable candidate permitted on the tightly circumscribed ballot. It is in America's interest to support the Iranian people, even though they are not necessarily pro-Western and embody a streak of Persian nationalism that could challenge the U.S. goal of security in the Persian Gulf.

U.S. policy should not be driven by whether initiatives "help Khatami" or "hurt Khatami;" he is not the critical figure in the outcome of the clerical/anti-clerical competition. Instead, U.S. policy should be targeted to encourage the "70 percent" to sustain their effort to change Iran. Our initiatives should reach out directly to the Iranian people by lifting sanctions on exporting personal consumer goods and by increasing the number of visas allotted to Iranians, while demanding reciprocity in return. We should also significantly expand educational, entertainment, and informational programming on radio and television beamed to Iran, especially on the Persian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. These initiatives need to be packaged boldly; otherwise, Iran can portray them as inadequate responses to Khatami's call for "a dialogue of civilizations."

While supporting the people, we should target the government. We should continue to deprive the Iranian regime of capital and outside investment that would resuscitate its economy. In recent years, Washington has registered considerable success in drying up resources for Iranian military expenditure while exacerbating the regime's

economic situation. And while we should work with Iran in those areas where interests overlap (e.g., Afghanistan), we must avoid any unnecessary bolstering of a regime that is substantially weaker today than it was a decade ago.

Despite this weakness, Iran remains a serious threat to the region and to the world. If successful, its effort to acquire nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them will thrust Iran to the top of the global security agenda. In addition, Iran remains deeply involved in terrorism. If the regime begins to crack from within, acts of political violence will probably increase. Working with Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, Iran might open new terrorism fronts against Israel and the United States. Overseas attacks, like the 1992 Hezbollah bombing of the Israeli embassy in Argentina, could become the rule, not the exception. If progress is to be made on Israeli-Lebanese peace, Iran will have to be pressed to stop shipping arms to Hezbollah via flights that Syria could end at any time. And if Iran is, indeed, found to have been involved in the 1996 terrorist bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia or is harboring the culprits of that outrage, then President Clinton's commitment to track down and punish those responsible must be honored.

In the end, events in Iran require a two- tiered U.S. response: We must do all we can to encourage the "70 percent" reform surge, while at the same time maintaining high vigilance against Iran's destabilizing behavior. In a race against time, assertive U.S. efforts may prove to be the factor that helps bring about real political change before the ayatollahs gain access to the most frightening weaponry in the world. ❖

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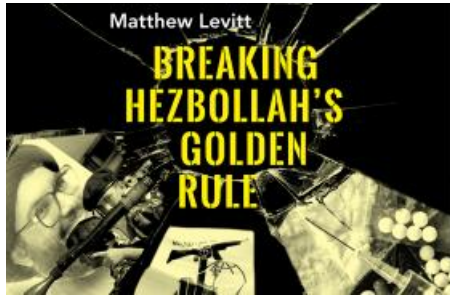
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