

How the U.S. Can Bolster Reform in Iran

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Jul 16, 1999

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Student demonstrations in Iran this week have exposed the unpopularity of the Islamic Republic, which, among other problems, imposes medieval restrictions on women and has presided over the halving of the average Iranian's income. The question for the U.S. is how best to support the forces of change.

European governments have responded to the demonstrations by rushing to President Mohammad Khatami's support. "We believe that the willingness for openness and for reforms expressed by President Khatami deserves support," said a spokesman for the French foreign ministry. That is exactly the wrong approach, for two reasons. First, the West should support principles, not individuals. We support freedom of expression, a value to which Mr. Khatami is less than wholeheartedly committed. On Tuesday he threatened that "deviations will be repressed with force and determination."

Second, Mr. Khatami's agenda is not to bring Iran back into the modern world. His goal, instead, is to strengthen the Islamic Republic through reforms that would restore its popularity. His planned reforms, if he succeeds in carrying them out, would make life better for Iranians but would do little to change the aggressive policies that threaten U.S. interests. In fact, under Mr. Khatami, Iran has kept up its arms deliveries to radical groups like Lebanon's Hezbollah that seek to undermine the Middle East peace process.

Most worryingly, Iran under Mr. Khatami has accelerated its missile program. In July 1998, Iran tested a missile with the range to hit Tel Aviv, and it is working on a multistage missile. The 1998 Rumsfeld Commission report warned that Iran may have an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting America within five years. Such an ICBM would carry a weapon of mass destruction, most probably a nuclear warhead.

The Clinton administration has been under strong congressional pressure to do something about Iranian proliferation, and specifically to raise with Moscow the role of Russian scientists in the Iranian missile program. The Kremlin has done little about the matter. Washington has imposed sanctions on a few Russian firms, but it has resisted measures designed to penalize Moscow for failing to enforce the agreements it has signed which forbid such proliferation activity.

Tough measures against Iranian proliferation have been slandered by critics as a policy designed to isolate Iran. Nothing could be further from the truth. Washington wants a dialogue with the Iranian government, if for no other

reason than to explain U.S. concerns. It is Tehran that refuses to talk; Iran is the only country in the world that refuses to have diplomatic relations with the U.S. Iran's mullahs also ban satellite dishes to stop Iranians from receiving American television shows and make impossible the sale in Iran of most U.S. books and videos.

In a January 1998 CNN interview, Mr. Khatami called for "a dialogue of civilizations." What hypocrisy. His government refuses to allow more than a few hundred Americans a year to go to Iran, while in 1997, 1,863 Iranian students studied at U.S. universities and 21,000 Iranians visited America. More Iranians could come if Iran allowed the U.S. to post in Tehran diplomats who could process visa applications, operating if necessary under the flag of the Swiss, who represent U.S. interests in Iran.

Iranian propaganda has been relatively successful at blaming the impasse on U.S. concerns about terrorism and illegal immigration -- which are in fact relatively minor obstructions. The Clinton administration has been too apologetic about those U.S. rules. Instead, it should seize every available opportunity to criticize Iran's restrictions on the free flow of ideas and of people. Americans need to show the Iranian people that we are on their side in their battle to open up Iran.

At the same time, the U.S. should do more to open up to the Iranian people. There are some real opportunities to advance U.S. political goals through trade. U.S. rules allow tourism and trade in informational materials. But more could be done. Iranians suffer from the dead hand of government firms and shadowy revolutionary foundations, which together control 80% of the Iranian economy. The U.S. could show its support for the private sector by relaxing restrictions on trade with private firms while putting a total ban on trade with state and revolutionary firms. Going even further, the U.S. might lift restrictions on exports of consumer goods. If Iran spends its foreign exchange on the latest U.S. fashions, that means fewer dollars it has to spend on arms.

The most attractive economic opportunities Iran offers U.S. business are investment in oil and gas. Unfortunately, any such investment would translate directly into more revenue for the Tehran regime -- money that would allow more arms purchases and quicker proliferation. Reducing the Iranian government's revenue and its access to loans has been the main way that the U.S. has been able to contain the Iranian threat to American security. After the imposition of sanctions, Iran had to curtail its arms buildup to less than half the pace it had planned. With a few more billion dollars a year, Iran would be able to accelerate its missile and nuclear programs and acquire more sophisticated armaments, with which it could threaten the security of the Strait of Hormuz. Keeping sanctions on oil and gas investment is therefore a national security necessity.

The protesting students in Iran represent the future; the mullahs chanting "death to America," the past. Change will come to Iran, either through the evolutionary reform process Mr. Khatami favors or through a more thoroughgoing and rapid change as the students want. Someday the U.S. will be able to lift all its restrictions on business with Iran. That day will come sooner if the U.S. government vigorously supports the forces of change by reaching out to the Iranian people while keeping tight restrictions on the Iranian government.

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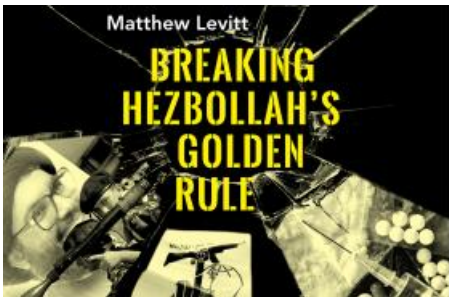
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