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A Checking Account for Democracy

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By committing to spend \$85 million to promote democracy in Iran in the next fiscal year, the Bush administration has signaled a major escalation of its efforts to challenge autocracy in Tehran. At the level of grand strategy, this major policy revision should be welcomed and supported. On principle, the U.S. should support the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. For reasons of national security, Washington also has an interest in promoting democracy in Iran, as a democratic regime in Tehran would not threaten the U.S. or its allies and could serve as a powerful force for stability in the region.

Whether this new policy initiative will actually foster democracy in Iran is hard to say. Outsiders find it easy to support democracy rhetorically; it is much harder to support democracy's advance concretely and effectively. All around the world, democracy-promotion is hard. Amazingly, after more than 20 years of American efforts to promote it around the world through assistance programs, we still know very little about what works and what doesn't. Quality assessments of democracy-promotion are few; "How To" manuals do not exist. And because the U.S. does not have an embassy in Tehran, executing democracy assistance programs for Iran are even more constrained.

Nonetheless, now that the strategic debate about whether to promote democracy in Iran is over, the next debate about how to do it most effectively must be joined.

The first principle of an effective policy is to avoid funding the wrong people. Now that these sums have been announced, all sorts of new Iranian "democrats" living outside the country have lined up for their share of the democracy pie. Given the repressive nature of the regime in Tehran, exile groups must play a role in fostering democratic change inside Iran. However, there must be criteria.

Above all else, the U.S. cannot support terrorist organizations or advocates of violent regime change. Iranians already have experienced, in one generation, a violent revolution and a long war. If the strategy for democracy promotion is to have any chance, it must avoid violence. Recipients of American support must also be committed to democratic practices and values and not simply the overthrow of the current dictatorship. A terrible outcome would be the demise of Iranian theocracy followed by the rise of a secular autocracy. Direct support for ethnic minorities seeking independence from Iran must also be avoided, full stop.

Second, the U.S. cannot play kingmaker. The new American program must aid and empower existing democrats, not create "democrats" from those with close ties to

Washington. There is no Ahmad Chalabi for Iran and there should be no project to create a Persian Chalabi.

Third, because of the repressive policies of the current regime in Tehran and the current tense climate in U.S.-Iranian relations, providing direct assistance to democratic leaders and organizers inside Iran will be extremely difficult. Anyone who takes American money will be labeled a traitor. Nonetheless, it must be Iranian democrats, not Washington government officials or American NGO leaders, who make the calculations about the risks of taking American money. After all, those on the ground are the people who best know their own situation and they are the ones who will suffer the consequences of repression.

Fourth, because even under the best circumstances it would be very difficult to spend \$85 million effectively on direct assistance, a major portion of these new funds should be earmarked for the development of surrogate radio and television networks, to expand the existing capacity of Radio Farda. New and expanded media outlets must be funded transparently and they must have editorial independence from the U.S. government.

In addition to independent news about the world and Iran, the content must also shift away from entertainment and toward more serious themes about the instances and consequences of corruption; the true economic, strategic, political and environmental costs of the nuclear program; and frank and serious discussions about the flaws in Iran's constitutional structure as well as the positive economic, political and social benefits of democratic institutions.

Radio and TV should not be the only vehicles for transferring this kind of knowledge. Web sites, international conferences and translations of texts about democracy and the market must also be used.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, these new resources must be deployed to increase the number of Iranians coming to the U.S. America's greatest tool of transformation is the American model itself. Special emphasis should be placed on giving scholarships to Iranian college students. To expand these society-to-society contacts, the U.S. must expand its capabilities to issue visas to Iranians in a manner that does not threaten American national security.

The best and boldest step would be to open a permanent visa processing office in Tehran. The regime might reject an American request to open an office in Iran, fearing perhaps that the massive line to obtain a visa snaking through the streets of Tehran would be a public relations nightmare for the regime. But the Iranian people should know that it is their regime, not our government, that is denying them scholarships, visas and plane tickets to come to the United States.

Even if the Bush administration and its successors followed all of the principles and policies outlined above, and minimized mistakes in execution and misjudgments about people, the effect on democratization inside Iran is difficult to predict. Social scientists have a terrible record in predicting the breakdown of autocratic regimes, much less the

consolidation of democratic governments. Doing nothing, however, has not worked for the last quarter century. Trying something else is long overdue.

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