

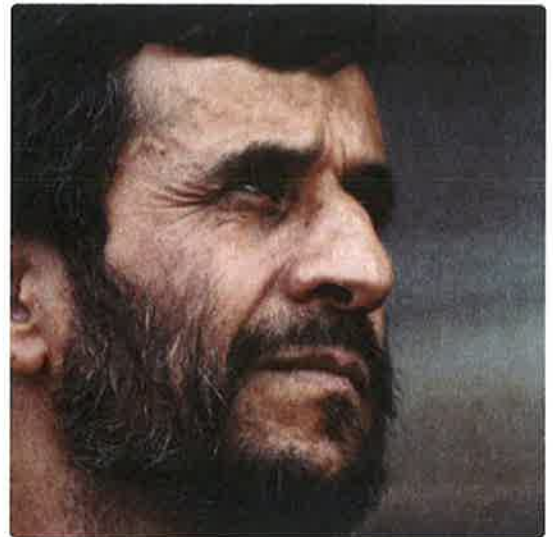
Opposite Directions

By **Abbas Milani**

The Iranian regime has made headlines this week with its announcement that it will allow inspections into its recently discovered enrichment site in Qom, and its agreement, albeit ambiguously, to allow enrichment to be handled by Russia or France. Less covered, but actually more important, are recent statements from the Iranian opposition against the nuclear weapons program--warning Western leaders not to be fooled by Ahmadinejad's latest concessions, and actually offering a viable alternative to solve the current nuclear standoff.

Iran's leadership knows that every policy decision about Iran in the West, or even in Russia and China, is haunted by the specter of the Iranian democratic movement--a recognition that the regime is suffering from profound inner fissures and lack of legitimacy at home. Russian vacillation in its support of the current Iranian government has left Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad worried about losing their international support. Their foreign policy is founded on the assumption that Russia and China will support them against any serious UN sanctions. To ensure the continuation of this crucial support, the regime has had to offer some concessions on the nuclear issue. Moreover, Khamenei does not want to fight on two fronts: with Iranian democrats at home, and with the international community abroad.

While the regime is showing conciliatory signs to the West, at home they have tried to sell the latest agreement as a great victory for the regime. The world, their message is, has come around to accept Iran's terms. For example, the commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, talking to 300 Basiji supporters meeting in the still-occupied American embassy compound in Tehran on Friday, announced that the Khatami style of negotiation was tantamount to treason and the new empowered Iran is forcing its terms on the West. The often-implicit and sometimes-explicit message is that the policy of confrontation pursued by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad--as opposed to the policy of negotiating with the West suggested by reformists--has allowed them to now negotiate from a position of strength. To reinforce that message, they also engaged in the provocative act of testing a new medium-range missile. Ahmadinejad's suggestion that Iran's next meeting with the group of 5+1 should be at the level of heads of state is rooted more in his



need for a legitimizing photo-op than any substantive policy initiative.

Iranian democrats, on the other hand, have in recent days made a concentrated effort to tell the world that the regime is in fact negotiating from a position of weakness; that it does not intend to abide by any agreements they now make; and, most importantly, that the democrats are committed to approaching the nuclear issue differently than the current regime. It is these statements that deserve the most attention in the West.

In recent years, the regime in Tehran and its apologists in America have cultivated the myth that on the nuclear issue, there is a "national consensus" in Iran, and that nothing separates the regime from its democratic opponents. From this faulty premise, many policymakers draw the conclusion that the United States must make a deal with the current regime and not wait or worry about a more democratic Iran. Three statements in the last few days have proven this premise faulty. In reading these statements, we must bear in mind that the reformists are all trying to walk a fine line in demarcating their position from that of the regime, while not offering any opportunities for the regime to accuse them of selling out Iran's sovereign rights.

First came an announcement early last week by Mohsen Makhmalbaff, a spokesperson for the Green Movement. In carefully calibrated language that would allow democratic leaders in Iran plausible deniability yet convince the reader that he was in fact speaking on their behalf, Makhmalbaff declared that Iranian democrats do not want a nuclear bomb, they understand the international community's anxieties about the current regime's nuclear program, and indeed share those same anxieties.

Iranian democrats know full well that a nuclear-empowered Khamenei is first and foremost a threat to their own safety. On the most basic level, if ever there is a Chernobyl-type accident at Bushehr, the site of Iran's reactor, it is Iranians who will pay the consequence. This is not an unreasonable fear, given that parts for the reactor have been bought in the black-market, and rogue scientists have played a significant role in building the reactor--which happens to be in a particularly earthquake-prone part of Iran. More importantly, the regime, empowered with nuclear weapons, will feel impervious to outside pressure, nothing standing in its way to use any means necessary to roll back democratic progress in the country. Makhmalbaff's statement clearly articulates their fear that the regime wants the bomb to consolidate its hold on power.

Within a couple of days, this statement was followed more boldly by another from an actual opposition leader, Mehdi Karubi, who repeated verbatim some of Makhmalbaff's language. Karubi began his statement by suggesting that a regime that lies to its own people lies to the world--in other words, don't believe anything the regime promises now, they will break their promises as they have broken their many covenants with the people of Iran. He declared definitively that Iranian democrats have no intention to pursue a nuclear bomb. And in perhaps the most significant pronouncement of the week, the generally cautious opposition leader Mir-Hossein Moussavi voiced these same sentiments in a statement this week, blaming the regime's nuclear adventurism for bringing Iran to the precipice of disaster.

Though the leaders of the Green Movement have previously questioned the strategic wisdom

and moral hazards of a nuclear bomb, these recent statements are the clearest and most fevered rejection of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. They know the current regime, besieged at home by tensions in its own ranks and a citizenry who continue to defy it, seems willing to make short-term nuclear concessions to the West in exchange for assurances that the West will not press human rights issues--a similar grand bargain made with Libya. But the Iranian opposition is warning that, unlike Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, Khamenei and Ahmedinejad have no intention of actually ending their pursuit--only buying enough time to ride out the current domestic crisis.

The United States and other Western countries would be well-served to listen to the warnings of Iranian democrats. For almost two decades, the West has been duped into playing a game the Islamic regime knows it will win. The West has been attacking Iran where its defenses are strongest while ignoring its weakest link. The regime has been winning the nuclear battle with the world and is losing--and came close to defeat--the war for democracy against the people of Iran. Instead of playing the losing game, the West should play the game it can win. When negotiations inevitably break down, neither military action nor partial sanctions will stop the regime's drive for nuclear weapons. Only a democratic Iran can solve the current impasse.

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