

U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future of Democracy in Iran

U.S. policy toward Iran has reached a crucial crossroads. Since the early 1970s, Washington has developed policies that lasted only until the next crisis, forcing the United States into a reactive mode, at the mercy of events and their subsequent tactical responses. A series of harried reactions, however, do not add up to an effective strategy toward this crucial country in a region of incomparable geostrategic significance. Harvesting the promise of a new Iran policy and avoiding its perils require a diplomacy wise in its historic insights, patient and prudent about its goals, honest and clear about its true foes and friends, and credibly resolute in its use of the requisite tools to bring about the desired ends.

Today, many suggest that ensuring that the Islamic Republic does not acquire a nuclear weapon should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward Iran. A failure in this effort, they warn, will not only alter the balance of forces in the region, but more ominously still, it will sound the death knell of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Yet, real as these dangers are, the failures of the European Union and the United States to develop a coherent policy on the nuclear issue; the failure of the Iranian opposition to engage the regime seriously about the safety as well as the real strategic and economic costs and benefits of the nuclear program; and, finally, the adventurism of China, Russia, North Korea, and Pakistan have resulted in an Islamic Republic which today finds itself in a win-win-win situation on the nuclear question. None of the three current policies on the table—going along with the EU’s proposed negotiated agreement, a surgical strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities, or a “grand bargain” between the United States and Iran—will bring about an end to the regime’s nuclear adventurism.

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Ironically, although democracy has always been the Islamic Republic's Achilles' heel, these enumerated failures have turned the nuclear question into the clerics' Herculean club. It has been the only issue in the last 15 years around which the regime has been able to garner public support. To solve Iran's nuclear problem, the West has to stop playing to the regime's strength and instead concentrate on its weakness. In other words, in spite of the many dire and serious warnings about the nuclear threat, the key to

solving Iran's nuclear problem is the fate of the country's democratic movement. Democracy is in fact the focal point where Iranians' interests converge with those of the United States. If the past is any indication, democracies are far more likely than dictatorships to engage in a serious and honest "roll back" of their nuclear programs. Furthermore, only in a democracy can there be a serious national dialogue about the real costs and benefits of "going nuclear."¹ Finally, democracies are far

less likely to allow terrorists access to their arsenals.

Fortunately, in contrast to most Muslim countries in the Middle East, Iran has a viable, indigenous democratic movement. Also setting it apart, the United States is, for the most part, admired politically and culturally by many elements of Iran's democratic movement and by the Iranian population in general. The movement sees the United States as its potential ally, but it is also wary of being used, in appearance or in reality, as a bargaining chip in a realpolitik between Tehran and Washington. The United States must treat Iran's democracy movement as an independent ally, not a ward. It must respect its autonomy and its political exigencies at home, and most importantly, it must not interfere in the movement by anointing any person, group, or faction. Patronizing the democratic movement by throwing money at it will only serve to strengthen the regime's claims that democrats in Iran are tools of the United States.

Some in Tehran and Washington today, for a variety of often self-serving purposes, offer facile solutions to the complex problem of U.S.-Iranian relations. On one hand, pessimists have already declared the democratic movement in Iran not just dead but deracinated. The regime, they say, is here to stay. It has weathered its crisis and is well ensconced; the opposition is scattered, and the populace is depoliticized; and the once active and vibrant youth are either fighting the demon of drug addiction or have morphed into what Francis Fukuyama calls the "Last Man,"² an amorphous mass of lonely and atomized individuals bereft of ideals and goals, obsessed with frivolous consumerism or a destructive nihilism that values and hopes for nothing.

On the other hand, optimists see an utterly isolated, incompetent regime on the verge of immediate collapse. They have pinned their hopes on false messiahs popping up at a rapidly rising rate in the plethora of Iranian diaspora media outlets. A simple flick of a finger by the United States; a few million dollars thrown at the diaspora media or disbursed among those who claim to wear the mantle of the democratic movement in Iran; or if money fails, a surgical strike on Iran's suspected nuclear sites is allegedly all that is needed to topple the renegade rogue regime. No sooner had whispers of U.S. dollars hit the rumor mills than a sudden surge of newly minted "democratic activists" and media personalities emerged, short on bona fide experience in fighting for democracy but gargantuan in their appetite for financial assistance. Neither the quixotic optimism of the second group nor the incorrigible nihilism of the first, however, can help navigate the way to a real solution of the Iran problem.

Avoiding these two extreme positions is not enough to develop a successful strategy toward Iran. Success will require a genuine understanding of the enemy's weaknesses and strengths as well as a sober assessment of one's own powers and limitations. Ultimately, an effective strategy must free itself both of the ideologues who sees the world as their ideology dictates and of the speculative scholar who offers endless complexities, paradoxes, and relativisms but seems to abjure action. The situation in Iran is complex enough to require the resolution and decisiveness of the military commander, the patience and prudence of the diplomat, and finally the appreciation of the scholar for the intricacies and paradoxes that define Iran as a nation. This combination, although daunting, is surely not impossible for the United States, as well as the Iranian opposition, to achieve.

Democracy's Indigenous Roots

Iran's democratic movement is seemingly dormant, but it has endured for a century. Contrary to the claims of foes of modernity in Iran, particularly among the clerics who suggest that democracy is by nature Western in origin and foreign to Iran's Islamic cultural climes, Iran has a long history of thinking independently about some of democracy's seminal ideas.³ Over the last century, the threads of this movement were woven into the very fabric of Iranian society; the failure of President Muhammad Khatami or any other leader to deliver on reform promises indicates only tactical defeat and not the movement's end. During its origins from 1905 to 1907, a strange, cognitively and historically discordant coalition of forces composed of clerics—some modernist and others uncompromisingly traditionalist—merchants of the bazaar, intellectuals, and segments of the urban poor and middle

classes launched the Constitutional Revolution in hopes of creating a secular democratic polity. By 1979, that same coalition came together to overthrow the shah.

In 1905, secular intellectuals had outmaneuvered the clerics. The 1905 democratic victory was quickly followed by the realization that simply deposing a despot does not beget democracy. Successful democracy requires a society with a complicated web of institutions, social habits of tolerance, and civic responsibility. More than anything else, democracy requires a civil society and a middle class prudent in politics, free from the leveling tendencies of the poor or the oligarchic proclivities of the rich. Although the desire for democracy in Iran was present at the beginning of the twentieth century, the requisite social institutions and habits were sadly wanting. The Pahlavi era, beginning with Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, heralded an age that saw rapid establishment of the social institutions and forces necessary for democracy.

Unfortunately, this development occurred under deeply undemocratic circumstances. The new Iranian constitution of 1905 was adapted—indeed translated with some modification—from Belgium, where the king reigns but does not rule. The constitution stipulated an independent bicameral parliament, an independent judiciary, free elections, and freedom of thought and assembly. With the exception of a few limitations placed on women and non-Muslims, both written into law as a concession to Shiite clerics, the laws were democratic. In reality, however, both Reza Shah and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, ruled with an iron fist. For nearly the duration of the Pahlavi era, the parliament was simply a dour, drab debating society merely rubber-stamping all royal commands. Freedom of the press and assembly were almost never respected. Political parties, with the exception of the democratic experiment in 1941–1953, were never allowed to thrive and participate in the political process. The shah's sudden declaration in 1975 that Iran was henceforth to have only one party marked the zenith of these undemocratic practices.

Despite Soviet Cold War propaganda suggesting that the United States wanted to maintain despotism in Iran, there is evidence that for much of the shah's rule, from 1941 to 1979, the United States often tried to convince him that his survival depended on opening up the political system to more democratic participation. The 1953 decision by the Eisenhower administration to participate in a British and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coup to topple the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq, as well as the realpolitik years of Richard M. Nixon's presidency, were the only, albeit egregious, systematic exceptions to U.S. whispers of democracy.⁴ Ironically, a sudden surge of oil revenues made the shah more independent of the West and of the United States and thus made him more

oblivious and at times indignant to these democratic pressures. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was more than anything else an attempt by the Iranian people, transformed by the shah's far-reaching economic reforms, to demand their political rights.

The current situation in Iran and the regime's alleged strategic stability is comparable to that of the mid-1970s, when British and U.S. embassies and intelligence agencies were resolute in their declarations that the shah's rule was stable and the opposition had been destroyed. The CIA went so far as to claim in 1977 that Iran was not even in a prerevolutionary phase. Less than two years later, of course, the shah was deposed by the Islamic Revolution.

The regime in Tehran today is tactically stable but has deep strategic vulnerabilities. Its relative stability derives from the failure of the Khatami experiment. When Khatami was chosen as the president in 1997, despite all-out opposition by the conservative clerical hierarchy, there was euphoria in Iran and throughout much of the world. In some of the Western press, he was anointed as the Iranian Gorbachev. It was hoped that he would use his popular mandate to radically change Iran. When a majority of his allies found their way to the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, hope for change was even greater.

Khatami promised a government based on the rule of law in which the private lives of citizens would be immune from the intrusive gaze of the state and where paralegal institutions, from "special courts" to the menacing, chain-wielding, and acid-throwing zealots in the street enforcing "morality codes," would be dismantled. To the youth, he offered the promise of jobs, and to women, he held out the hope of greater legal parity. To the private sector, he offered the possibility of more governmental support, and finally, to the radical wing of his coalition, who had during the days of Ayatollah Khomeini advocated the elimination of the private sector from "key industries," he offered a more vigorous support of their statist agenda. He hinted at curtailing the power of the "Spiritual Leader" and granting more power to Iran's elected offices. He also promised, yet failed to deliver, fair and free elections.

Khatami's platform was inherently contradictory and impossible to fulfill. More importantly, he underestimated the guile and ruthless cunning of his clerical opponents. The conservatives used a combination of tactics to transform Khatami from a beacon of hope into an object of ridicule and the epitome of political impotence. They used the judiciary as a tool to imprison

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or kill opponents, and they used the Guardian Council, a body of clerics and jurists entrusted by the constitution to ensure that all laws abide by Islam's tenets, to derail the reformists' legislative agenda. Furthermore, the Iranian opposition's inability to organize itself effectively into a viable alternative, U.S. problems in Iraq, and \$50 per barrel of oil have all allowed the regime to reconsolidate its hold on power and extend its labyrinthine system of patronage and subsidies.

In Iran's current reality, accepting money from the U.S. is a political kiss of death.

Despite its apparent stability, the Islamic regime is structurally fragile and strategically vulnerable. Millions of Iran's 75 million people rely on direct governmental patronage. Of the nearly 1,500 companies confiscated by the regime and its newly formed "revolutionary foundations" (*bonyads*) on the eve of the revolution, almost every one has been losing money and receiving annual government subsidies. Many have already been sold to "the private sec-

tor"—the regime's cronies—in sweetheart deals reminiscent of the Soviet "privatization" fiasco. Furthermore, the regime subsidizes the price of such staples of the daily Iranian diet as bread, sugar, and tea. The exact figure for all of these subsidies remains unknown, but it is certainly to the tune of billions of dollars. The companies that have been losing money had all been highly profitable before the revolution, but in the last two decades, as the result of mismanagement and corruption and the use of company payrolls as a way to "employ" hundreds of thousands of the regime's supporters and musclemen and women, they have become a financial liability for the regime. The new oil bonanza has allowed the regime to underwrite these costly bribes, but a drop in oil prices will underscore the regime's vulnerability and shake it to its core.

Making the present situation far more volatile, however, is the existence of a seasoned democratic movement that only appears dormant to the untrained eye. Beneath the veneer of calm are millions of unemployed youth. According to a recent report prepared for the government by its own National Youth Organization, 30 percent of young Iranians are now unemployed. With the young demographic structure of the population, the number of the unemployed, according to the same organization, is likely to increase.⁵ Furthermore, systemic corruption and economic incompetence; ideological bankruptcy; and, most importantly, the women's movement have been feeding into a sea of popular discontent. The misogyny of some Islamic laws—allowing girls to be legally married at the "age of puberty," denying women custody of any children over the age of seven, and allowing men to

have multiple wives while forcing women to remain in unhappy marriages—makes it impossible for women to achieve parity with men under the current Islamic regime. Can the current regime successfully combat these forces in the long run?

Separating Fact from Fad

In Tehran today, talking about the “China model” as the regime’s sole path of salvation is something of a fad. According to this model, the regime will liberalize the economy and improve people’s livelihood but keep a tight, monopolist hold on political power. Just as Shakespeare suggested that despots “busy giddy minds with foreign wars,” the China model aims to keep giddy minds busy with business and hopes that this preoccupation keeps people politically inactive, if not altogether uninterested. Of course, the looming threat of a U.S. invasion allows the Iranian regime the luxury of trying to use both war and promised economic welfare to preoccupy its citizens.

Yet, in reality the China model is sure to fail in Iran for a variety of reasons. In the economic realm, China’s robust industrial base has allowed it to maintain its prosperity through an impressive export sector. The Iranian economy, meanwhile, has shown a stark inability to export much other than oil and some copper, as well as the traditional staples of caviar, carpets, pistachios, and in recent years a small number of delicacies that are the diaspora’s romantic connection to the smells and tastes of home. Furthermore, China has established an equally impressive record of attracting foreign investment, an area in which the Islamic Republic has had a dismal record.

Finally, the China model has in fact already been attempted under Reza Shah (1925–1941) and his son Muhammad Reza Shah (1941–1979) as well as during Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s presidency (1989–1997), and it failed on each occasion. It failed because people do not live by bread alone. Now, even more than during the Pahlavi era, democracy has become an essential staple of our age. Regardless of how affluent oppressed people become, they will eventually demand their democratic and human rights. Aside from this “natural” tendency to want freedom and democracy, historical evidence suggests that economic affluence in societies often not only leads to greater political demands, but also affords the new affluent classes the political savvy as well as the social and economic power and leverage to see their demands met. Today, Iran’s vibrant civil society, which includes more than 8,000 non-governmental organizations⁶ and a staggering 75,000 bloggers, as well as the Iranian diaspora, is licking its Khatami wounds, but it is far from dead or even dying. Sooner or later, that unpredictable moment of political epiphany will come, and the dissatisfied but intimidated populace will realize that the

regime has lost its ability to oppress its people violently, as examples in places as disparate as Ukraine, Lebanon, Georgia, and Romania have shown in recent years.

At the same time, the recognition that this moment of transition might be near and, more importantly, the hope that sooner or later the promise of U.S. dollars to support the Iranian democratic movement will materialize has led to the recent emergence of opportunist elements claiming to repre-

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sent the Iranian people. Fanciful stories about alleged support at home for these sometimes fictive groups, stories about their individual (such as those about Ahmed Chalabi) or group influence and networks in Iran, and exaggerated claims about the influence in Iran of newly created diaspora media outlets, have made it more difficult to distinguish true democrats from political parasites. A simple rule of thumb, however, can distinguish the two groups. In Iran's current reality, accept-

ing money from the United States or in fact from any foreign government with vested interests in Iran is a kiss of death. Anyone who solicits such funds or claims to be a safe conduit for such funds to "genuine democrats" in Iran is, by definition, not a true democrat.

Another fad, this one in Washington, has been to think about Iran in terms of two ticking alarm clocks: one nuclear and the other democratic. If democracy is not going to ring first, some argue, military action is required to stop the nuclear clock from going off. In reality, the regime has already de facto won the nuclear game, and democracy remains the only hope of solving the Iran nuclear problem. The regime has sought the bomb for the same reason that it does everything: its monomaniacal commitment to self-preservation. If this assessment is correct, then the regime today faces a win-win-win situation. If the West does nothing, the Iranians will almost certainly acquire a nuclear weapon sooner rather than later. If the EU or the United States reaches a negotiated agreement with Iran, experience from the past as well as the regime's many breaches of its promises and of law shows that they will cheat and build the bomb anyway. If the United States or Israel make surgical attacks, then the regime, due to the clearly predictable surge of nationalism among the people, as well as the inevitable collateral damage and its political consequences, will enhance its political support, entrench its power, and acquire more justification to openly and defiantly develop a bomb in the future.

Ironically, the West collectively and the United States independently have over time strengthened, not weakened, Tehran's clerical regime. Its

Achilles' heel has been the internal challenge to its survival posed by the democratic movement. Iran's vast potential for economic growth, squandered by the clerics' corruption, despotism, and adventurism in international relations, has increasingly undermined the regime's legitimacy and added urgency and power to the democratic movement. Philosophically, in the age of democracy and popular sovereignty, the regime's weakness is rooted in its outdated claim to divine legitimacy and its dismissal of popular sovereignty and secular nationalism as Western concoctions.

Although the regime is deeply isolated and is distrusted and despised by the majority, it still enjoys the support of the small portion of the population that has been the chief recipient of its patronage. The regime's greatest strength has been its claim to be the only country in the Middle East standing up to the United States. The nuclear question, particularly the way it has been spun in Tehran, has permitted the regime to emerge as the champion of Iran's sovereign rights, even in the eyes of many Iranians who despise their leaders. No one—not the Iranian opposition, U.S. government officials or academics, and certainly not the Europeans—has made any effort to establish a dialogue with the Iranian people about its nuclear program. There has been no discussion concerning the potential costs and benefits of a nuclear bomb, nor has it been pointed out that a nuclear Iran means the prolongation of the mullahs' hold on power. It is not at all clear how many Iranians would still support the regime's nuclear quest if it is made clear to them that such a program would prolong the life of the Islamic regime.⁷ As a result of this vacuum, the regime has filled the air with its patently vacuous and inherently contradictory claims of its divine destiny and divine right on one hand and nationalist duty to defend Iran's rights on the other.

Beyond Today's Bumper-Sticker Policies

The Iranian case demands a nuanced sense of realism bereft of the extremist ideologies that advocate panaceas such as conducting military strikes, tightening the embargo, or accepting the current regime as enduring and stable and engaging with it as the sole solution. To use the embargo as an example, dogmatic advocates of a continued or hardened embargo pay little heed to empirical evidence revealing the heavy costs that the embargo has inflicted both on U.S. companies and the Iranian people, amounting to billions of dollars on each side.⁸ They seem to care little that the embargo has benefited European companies, as well as the most corrupt and ruthless elements of the Islamic Republic. The embargo strengthens the regime specifically by enabling it to richly reward its domestic allies, such as right-wing

vigilantes, with “import licenses” for embargoed, hard-to-find commodities. The embargo also empowers the bonyads with illicit gains from the same import licenses. The Revolutionary Guards, clearly the regime’s most important tool of suppression, have made millions of dollars from importing banned and expensive commodities into their own private ports.

“End the embargo, and you consolidate the regime,” Manichean champions of the status quo claim. In reality, end the embargo, and it will reduce the power and privilege of these vigilantes, bonyads, and the Revolutionary Guards. As the regime is dependent on patronage for its survival, limiting

their potential avenues would be one more nail in the coffin of an increasingly despised regime. It will also help hundreds of U.S. companies hoping to pursue ventures and sales in Iran, such as Cisco, ready to sell routers to Iran and thus pave the highways and byways of information, and Boeing, which stands to make huge profits from refurbishing Iran’s dangerously aging and ailing airline industry.

Ending the embargo will also help further integrate Iran into the global economy, and ample evidence indicates that the more a regime such as Iran is allowed into the global network, the more the legal and economic opacities that nourish such regimes dissipate. Such integration will allow for the emergence of a more vibrant middle class and will strengthen the private sector and civil society. Because this tripartite force is the harbinger of democracy, ending the embargo will directly help the country’s often economically strangled democratic movement. The growth of the private sector, now stifled under the heavy weight of the parasitic bonyads, the regime’s rampant crony capitalism, and its occasional flirtation with forms of state socialism, is an essential step in strengthening the Iranian democratic movement. It is an adage as old as Aristotle, yet witnessed as recently as the empirical realities of countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, that a middle class and its civil society, as well as the painfully uneven growth of a free market, are a society’s best guarantors and promoters of democracy.

Beyond the specific effects of the embargo, policymakers should recognize that the existing Western strategy toward Iran, such as it is, has failed. It is neither weakening the regime nor facilitating democracy; it has not curbed its nuclear weapons program nor undermined its support for terrorism. One reason for this failure is the fact that there has been no coherent and unified Western strategy. Even more importantly, under the existing conditions, there can arguably never be such a unified policy. U.S. policymakers should

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finally recognize, as the mullahs long have, that the United States and the EU, including the United Kingdom, do not share the same interests and goals when it comes to Iran. The status quo and the embargo have been an economic and diplomatic bonanza for the Europeans. They have kept the U.S. embassy and U.S. companies out of Iran, allowing the Europeans to play the role of an intermediary in the realm of diplomacy and affording them a lucrative monopolist position in Iran's economy.

Some have argued that France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are playing the role of a good cop, offering incentives to Iran, while the United States looms in the background as the bad cop, threatening Iran if it does not reach a deal with the Europeans. This strategy's supporters seem to overlook basic police interrogation techniques. For the game to work, the two cops must both be working for the same goal in close cooperation with each other. The suspect must also be in the dark about the nature of the game being played. Otherwise, he or she will turn the game on its head and use it to his or her advantage. In the current international version of this game, the fact that Iran clearly knows that the EU and the United States do not share the same interests has allowed the regime to use tensions between the skeptical partners to its own interest. The regime often boasts to its supporters that it has succeeded in playing Europe against the United States, diplomatically isolating Washington.

Europe's profitable monopoly has not been without its price. One political consequence has been that the Iranian people have come to despise what they see as Europe's wanton greed and willingness to overlook startling breaches of human rights in favor of an oil deal or a rich licensing agreement. The United States, conversely, has gained the good will and respect of the vast majority of the Iranian people, particularly the youth, as the only country in the world willing to stand up to the mullahs. The August 1953 syndrome—the condemnation of the United States for its role in overthrowing the popular Mossadeq government—seems to be gradually retreating from the nation's active memory. The only threat to this valuable political trend is a U.S. foreign policy that seems to betray the democratic movement and afford legitimacy to the current regime.

Supporting the Democratic Movement in Iran

Increasingly, the continuation of the status quo in U.S. policy on Iran is no longer a tenable option. A small example of the incidental cost of maintaining it can be seen in the field of education. British and Canadian universities have been reaping a harvest of cash and brilliant students as the result of the visa difficulties faced by Iranian students hoping to study in the United

States. British universities from Oxford to Durham have been granting a surprisingly large number of doctorates to Iranian Revolutionary Guards and children of the clerical elite. Canada too has sustained some of its most troubled and isolated universities through the enrollment of thousands of highly qualified and motivated Iranian students. According to a recent survey by an Iranian government agency, a stunning 45 percent of Iranian youth indicate that, given a chance, they would leave Iran for a life of exile.⁹ It is reasonable to assume that the United States is the destination of choice for nearly every Iranian student wishing to study abroad, and every student who studies in the United States and returns to Iran is a potential Trojan horse of democracy.

The Iranian clerics came to power relatively recently by masterminding a political heist and usurping absolutist power in the midst of a democratic revolution. They know from experience how easily a small error can gain revolutionary momentum overnight and are unlikely to open their citadel to gift-bearing Americans. Consequently, the new U.S. strategy must be built with small, innocuous jigsaw pieces that can and will coalesce into an organic and democratic whole at some unpredictable moment. Every Iranian youth who studies at a U.S. university and every Iranian scholar who attends a conference, every U.S. scholar or intellectual who visits Iran, and every genuine political activist who manages to visit the United States, as well as every successful member of the Iranian diaspora who travels home, is a piece of that Trojan horse puzzle. It is folly to try to predict the exact moment when the pieces will coalesce into a whole. Taking the chimera of the status quo's calm as an indication of the regime's strategic stability is similarly unwise. The new U.S. strategy toward Iran must therefore focus on fostering an atmosphere that will be most conducive to the success of the country's democratic movement by including at least seven important actions.

First, the United States should end the embargo and replace it with smart sanctions on the regime, its foundations, and its leaders. Many leading Iranian clerics and their families have a vast network of investments, usually from illicit gains in Iran or from oil, arms, and other "commissions" abroad. Nevertheless, these leaders, many of them responsible for killing and torturing Iranian citizens, travel and trade freely around the world. Europeans, obviously well informed about these illegal activities, cannot be expected to enforce sanctions or bring charges against the very officials with whom they do business. It is difficult to imagine that the U.S. intelligence agencies do not have detailed information about the financial shenanigans of these leaders. This information should be made public. It is even more difficult to comprehend how these leaders travel freely around the world while their opponents, Iran's genuine democrats, face all manner of difficulty in coming

to the United States. This balance must be reversed. Just as in the days of the Soviet Union, when democratic activists and exiled opponents of the regime were afforded special treatment and access to the United States, Iranian democrats should be granted equally easy access.

Second, the United States must declare in words and show in deeds that, in spite of any changes in its economic or diplomatic ties with the Iranian regime, it is always on the side of the Iranian people and their democratic efforts. A no-less-important part of such a declaration should be a commitment to respect the independence and autonomy of the movement, reiterating the U.S. government's dedication to the idea that the future of Iran will and should be determined by the people of Iran themselves. A necessary corollary of these democratic principles must be to announce clearly that the United States will neither anoint any group or person as the future leader of Iran, nor cooperate with or use as surrogates any group that has been involved in terrorism in the past or was a ward of terrorist regimes such as that of Saddam Hussein.

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Third, as a necessary consequence of the above principles, the United States should also declare that it will not provide cash assistance to any Iranian media outlet or opposition group inside or outside of Iran. At the same time, it should offer technological support to all democratic forces who want to broadcast to the Iranian people, insisting on transparency in all such aid and assistance. This will dissuade corrupt and opportunist elements from banking on dangled U.S. dollars and will also free genuine democratic forces from the taunts and taints of a regime that labels all of its opponents as U.S. lackeys. According to current estimates, there are now six million satellite dishes in Iran, giving somewhere between 15 million and 20 million people access to diaspora broadcasts. Yet, Iran has a population of 75 million. Furthermore, the majority of those who now have access to satellite dishes are members of the middle and upper classes, as well as small segments of the urban lower classes, and most are probably already staunch foes of the regime.¹⁰ Talking to them is preaching to the converted. Satellite broadcasts need to reach the 50 million who are now electronically disenfranchised. Only broadcasts through short and medium wave can ensure democratic access to all strata of the Iranian people, and the U.S. government can volunteer to facilitate this access free of charge.

Fourth, a concomitant part of this plan can and indeed must be a commitment to a transparently funded, independent, and autonomous radio and

television program broadcast to Iran, dedicated to the cause of democracy and human rights and universally accessible. As recent studies of the experience of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in Eastern Europe have shown, such broadcasts played an important role in the evolution of the democratic movements in this region. Václav Havel called such broadcasts as “important as the sun itself.”¹¹ The tactical, strategic, and organizational lessons of recent transitions to democracy need to be shared with the Iranian people, and an independent media outlet can be the conduit for their transmission.

A new U.S. strategy must be built on small, innocuous pieces.

Fifth, current U.S. laws have placed draconian limits on the ability of Iranian artists, intellectuals, and activists—for a time even Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi—to gainfully publish their works in the United States. Not only must these laws be immediately rescinded, but the United States must then help enable democratic activists in Iran to publish their works in English as well as the translation of

great works on democracy into Persian. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Franklin Publishing House in Iran worked toward making great works of world literature and social theory available to Iranians. The need is even greater now for such attempts at cross-cultural democratic pollination.

Sixth, the United States should make goodwill gestures to the Iranian people that will further disarm the regime’s propaganda about the U.S. “crusade” against Islam in Iran and throughout the rest of the Muslim world. Public diplomacy can be better accomplished with deeds rather than mere words. Just as humanitarian aid in the aftermath of the tsunami seems to have improved the U.S. image in Indonesia, so too in Iran will simple, cost-efficient, humanitarian gestures go a long way toward neutralizing the venom of Islamist propaganda jihad.

For example, the cities of Tehran and Kerman, with populations of about 12 million and one million, respectively, sit on two of the world’s most dangerous fault lines; seismologists have predicted that earthquakes will eventually shake both of these cities. It is estimated that there will be almost two million casualties in Tehran alone. The United States should immediately lift all limits on the export of technologies and equipment necessary to help predict earthquakes. It can also announce that it will donate to Iran a few earthquake prediction centers. The actual cost to the United States would be no more than \$10 million for each of these centers, but the public relations impact would be enormous. Goodwill gestures, such as the decision of the U.S. government to send aid to Iran after the December 2003 Bam

earthquake, must be taken and, if legally possible, implemented unilaterally without expecting a response in kind. Even if the unilateral gesture is rejected by the regime, as the post-Bam earthquake assistance was, it will further enhance U.S. prestige and undermine the regime's anti-U.S. rhetoric.

Seventh, the United States must use its influence in international organizations to bring pressure on the regime when it clearly abuses the human and democratic rights of the Iranian people. Unfortunately, the EU's silence in the face of last February's parliamentary coup by the conservatives is likely to embolden them in the upcoming elections. The regime understands power well, and it must be made aware that the Iranian people are not alone in their fight, that international organizations are ready to come to their aid.

Individually, these seven pillars seem insignificant, but together they can go a long way in shaping a strategy that can serve both the national interests of the United States as well as the will of the Iranian people. For Iran, democracy is no longer just a political ideal, but a sheer economic necessity. Only a democratic Iran can attract the requisite investments needed to solve Iran's endemic unemployment problems. For the United States, particularly during the second Bush administration, it has become the avowed centerpiece of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Ultimately, a successful U.S. strategy must assist the democratic movement and have the patience for the Tehran regime to collapse under its own inconsistencies. Internationally, part of the regime's *raison d'être* and legitimacy in the eyes of its Hizballah flanks rests in its commitment to anti-Americanism. At the same time, in obvious contradiction to its self-ascribed anti-U.S. role, Tehran increasingly seeks a security guarantee or promise that the United States will not seek to overthrow the regime. It also wants and needs U.S. approval for the flow of capital desperately needed to solve Iran's economic woes.

In this sense, Iran and the United States are both in a dilemma. The U.S. government wants to engage without strengthening the regime. The Islamic Republic, on the other hand, wants to achieve its goals without forfeiting its claim to be the sole Muslim country standing up to the world's superpower. The delicacy of the current U.S. position lies precisely in the fact that Washington must, with deft and calculated magnanimity, allow the regime to accomplish its inherently contradictory goals while wagering that the inconsistency in the Islamic Republic's position will open a gate for the Trojan horse of democracy to pass through.

Notes

1. For a discussion of nuclear "roll backs" in history and their political and social context, see Ariel Levite, "Never Say Never Again," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002–03): 59–88.

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1993).
3. See Abbas Milani, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2004).
4. See Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Islamic Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2001); Abbas Milani, "Hurley's Dream," *Hoover Digest*, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 144–152; Abbas Milani, *Peacock Prince* (Palgrave, forthcoming 2006).
5. National Youth Organization, "Sanade Sazmani-ye, Eshteghale Javanan" (Plan for Future Employment of the Youth), March 2005 [22 Esfand 1383].
6. The Ministry of Interior, which is in charge of issuing permits for these NGOs, has claimed that Iran has about 50,000 organizations, including 2,000 for youths and 800 for women. Others have put the figure much lower, at around 8,000. For the official report, see Ashraf Boroujerdi, *Report to the Cabinet*, March 2005.
7. See Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, "Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 99–114.
8. For an extensive review of the impact of the embargo, see Hossein Alikhani, *Sanctioning Iran: Anatomy of a Failed Policy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000). The Iranian Studies Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, organized by Muhammad Hafezi, has also been conducting an ongoing project on the economic costs of the embargo. Their initial findings were reported to a conference on the future of Iran, organized at Stanford University in November 2004.
9. National Youth Organization, "Sanade Sazmani-ye, Eshteghale Javanan," pp. 1–3.
10. Alireza Maybodi, interview with author, March 29, 2005 (television talk show host).
11. Havel made the statement in a message sent to the Conference on Cold War Broadcasting Impact, held at the Hoover Institution in October 2004. Several of the papers at the conference were detailed accounts of the degree of influence and audience share of the radio programs sponsored by the U.S. government. For example, see R. Eugene Parta, "A Preliminary Empirical Assessment of the Roles of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR During the Cold War" (presentation, Conference on Cold War Broadcasting Impact, Palo Alto, Calif., October 13–15, 2004).