

IRAN: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

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Chairman Berman and distinguished members of the committee:

The enormous cloud of suspicion hanging over Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's June 12th presidential victory has produced the greatest political and popular eruptions in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Members of the committee have surely seen the remarkable images and amateur videos—both heroic and harrowing—that have emerged from Iran over the past five weeks.

The United States now faces a unique challenge. After 30 years of not having official relations we finally prepared ourselves to recognize the legitimacy of an Iranian government, only to find that legitimacy has arguably been squandered. Today the Obama administration has the difficult task of reconciling when and how to deal with a disgraced regime which presents urgent national security challenges, while at the same time not betraying a popularly-driven movement whose success could have enormously positive implications for the United States.

I. Implications for Iran

The regime's eroded legitimacy

The events of the last six weeks have had enormous implications for Iran. At a political level, the Islamic Republic of Iran has ceded any pretensions of being a Republic. Past Iranian governments didn't necessarily represent a wide swath of Iranian society, but they did encompass a fairly wide swath of the Iranian political elite. If the Ahmadinejad government maintains power, the country will be ruled by a small cartel of hardline clerics and nouveau riche Revolutionary Guardsmen who reflect not only a relatively narrow swath of Iranian society, but also a narrow swath of the political elite.

Along with the legitimacy of the Republic, another election casualty is the legitimacy of Iran's most powerful man, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For two decades Khamenei had carefully cultivated an image of a magnanimous guide who stays above the political fray, allowing him to deflect responsibility for Iran's deepening economic malaise and political and social repression. Those days are now over. In defiantly supporting Ahmadinejad, Khamenei has exposed himself as a petty partisan. Formerly sacred red lines have been crossed as for the first time people have begun openly challenging Khamenei with chants of "*marg bar diketator*" i.e. death to the dictator.

Despite the popular outcry, Khamenei has refused to cede any ground, believing that compromise projects weakness and invites more pressure. Today his future rests largely in the hands of the regime's most elite fighting force, the 120,000 strong Revolutionary Guards. While growing fissures and dissent among senior clergy in Qom is certainly worrisome for Khamenei, dissent and fissures among top Revolutionary Guard commanders would be fatal for him. While at the moment they seemingly remain loyal to him as their commander in chief, as the economic situation continues to deteriorate and popular outrage persists, their fidelity is not a given.

The opposition's plight

The popular implications have been equally enormous. At their peak the demonstrations in Tehran included as many as three million people—according to Tehran mayor Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, himself a former senior Revolutionary Guard commander—representing a diverse socio-economic swath of society, with women often at the forefront. While the scale of the demonstrations has subsided due to the regime's skilled use of repression, people's sense of injustice and outrage has not.

The more hard-line elements of the *bassij* militia seem to truly relish violence. People are up against an ostensibly religious government that has shown no moral compunction, a government that blames the murder of an innocent 26-year-old woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, on the BBC and CIA. Every time people take to the streets they're risking their lives, and for every individual who takes to the streets there are likely hundreds if not thousands more at home who feel solidarity with them. Nightly protest chants of 'Allahu Akbar'—reminiscent of the 1979 revolution and meant to keep the momentum alive—have continued unabated.

The images and videos outside of Tehran have been similarly remarkable. In Isfahan—whose population is more traditional than that of Tehran—the demonstrators filled up the enormous Nagsh-e Jahan square, the largest historic square in the world. Similar protests have taken place in important cities like Shiraz, Tabriz, Mashad, and Kashan. In short, unrest has transcended age, religiosity, socio-economic status, gender, and geography.

One problem outside of Tehran, however, is that people are often less connected to the outside world via the Internet and satellite television, and have less access to technologies like video phones to document what's taking place. For this reason there's a lot of concern that the type of repression and human rights abuses that take place outside of the capital are much greater than that which has been documented only in Tehran alone. Outside of major cities the regime's repressive apparatus can act with impunity, and without accountability.

Nonetheless, the government's indiscriminate use of force and unwillingness to compromise has not forced the opposition into submission. Indeed, the current scale of repression has been both politically and financially costly for the regime. In the last week alone former Presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani—a founding father of the 1979 revolution—and Mohammed Khatami have challenged the legitimacy of the election, with the normally timid Khatami even calling for a popular referendum. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, the most senior cleric in Iran, recently issued a fatwa stating that the Supreme Leader is no longer fit to rule, arguably the greatest verbal challenge to Khamenei's leadership in the last 20 years.

The opposition's primary challenge at the moment is that its leadership and brain trust is either imprisoned, under house arrest or unable to communicate freely. Despite the tremendous popular outrage, at the moment there is no leadership to channel that outrage politically.

Still, the financial costs of maintaining martial law, overflowing prisons, and media and communications blackouts are significant for the government. According to European diplomats, the Iranian government incurs several thousand dollars per minute—tens of millions per week—to jam satellite television broadcasts from Voice of America and BBC

Persian. Given the decline in oil prices, the current scale of repression will prove difficult to sustain for a long period.

II. Implications for U.S. policy

Before President Obama's inauguration last January, this author wrote that "In charting a new strategy toward Tehran, the Obama administration must first probe a seemingly simple but fundamental question: Why does Iran behave the way it does? Is Iranian foreign policy rooted in an immutable ideological opposition to the United States, or is it a reaction to punitive U.S. policies? Could a diplomatic U.S. approach beget a more conciliatory Iranian response?"

The Obama administration's unsuccessful attempts to try and change the tone and context of the long-fraught U.S.-Iran relationship, coupled with the events of the last 6 weeks, make it abundantly clear that Tehran's hard-line leadership—particularly Ayatollah Khamenei—views an adversarial U.S.-Iran relationship as politically expedient.

Whereas the Bush administration unwittingly united Iran's disparate political factions against a common threat, the Obama administration's overtures accentuated the cleavages among Tehran's political elites. As one pragmatic conservative Iranian official noted to me several months ago, Tehran's hardliners were under newfound pressure to justify their hostility towards the United States: "If Iran can't make nice with a U.S. president named Barack Hossein Obama who is preaching mutual respect on a weekly basis and sending us *noerooz* greetings, it's pretty evident that the problem lies in Tehran, not Washington."

In light of the incredible events of the last six weeks, however, the Obama administration should reassess several aspects of its pre-election policy toward Iran:

- **Don't engage--Yet**

When the demonstrations were at their peak, the Obama administration prudently refrained from inserting the United States into Iran's internal political battles, for fear that we would taint those whom we aimed to help. We should continue to adhere to our policy of non-interference in Iran's internal affairs.

By prematurely engaging—before the dust has settled—we run the risk of implicitly endorsing an election that is still being hotly contested in Tehran and tipping the balance in favor of the hard-liners. This would demoralize the opposition and the millions of people who took to the streets and who continue to reject the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad government. It is telling that one of the popular protest chants of recent weeks has been "Death to Russia", condemnation of Moscow's early decision to recognize the election results.

While the costs of engagement in the short-term are very high, the benefits of immediate engagement are negligible. Tehran is still in disarray and Iranian officials have not shown any indication that they're prepared or capable of making the types of compromises necessary to reach an accommodation with the U.S. when it comes to the nuclear issue or the Palestinian-

Israeli conflict.

Engagement is not a policy in itself, but rather a tool that seeks, among other things, to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions and moderate its regional policies. Premature engagement, however, could have precisely the opposite effect, by sending the signal to Tehran that its nuclear program is of such paramount importance to Washington that it can act with impunity. Iran would not be incentivized to limit its nuclear ambitions, but rather to expand them.

Pausing engagement until the dust has settled in Tehran does not mean renouncing it altogether. Given Iran's sizeable influence on several key U.S. foreign policy challenges--namely Afghanistan, Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, energy security, and terrorism—shunning Iran entirely is not a medium or long-term option.

- **Don't make military threats**

If the events of the last six weeks prove one thing, it's that the Iranian regime is not suicidal. On the contrary it ruthlessly clings to power, and calibrates its actions accordingly. The Iranian regime, in other words, is odious but deterrable.

Indeed the problem we have with Iran has far more to do with the character of the regime than their nuclear program. The reality is that as long as Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and company are in power, we're never going to reach a modus-vivendi which sufficiently allays our concerns —and Israel's— about Iran's regional and nuclear ambitions.

Based on both recent and historical precedent, there's good reason to believe that not only would Khamenei and Ahmadinejad not be cowed by military threats, but that they would actually welcome U.S. or Israel strikes in order to try and achieve the same outcome as Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran—namely, to unite squabbling political factions against a common threat and keep agitated Iranian minds busy with foreign quarrels.

Ahmadinejad will also attempt to draw the United States into a war of words; we would be wise to ignore him. The Obama administration should continue to project the dignity and poise of a superpower rather than reciprocate the diatribes of an oppressive and undemocratic regime.

- **Condemn human rights abuses and help ease the communications embargo**

The Obama administration should not refrain from condemning the Iranian government's flagrant violence against its own citizenry and wrongful detention of political prisoners. While the regime claims only a few dozen have been killed and a few hundred imprisoned, European embassies in Tehran and independent human rights groups estimate that several thousand have been imprisoned and several hundred killed. Recent history has shown that outside pressure and condemnation works, as the regime incurs no costs for its egregious human rights abuses when the world remains silent.

One practical way of helping the cause of human rights in Iran is to help ease the communication's embargo that Iranians are currently experiencing. Given the fact that

foreign media were forced to leave and domestic media cannot freely report, everyday citizens bearing witness to events—whether via video phone or even simple email or blog communication—has become very important. For this reason, the Iranian government has implemented Internet, satellite television, and sms communication blackouts, as a means of preventing Iranians from communicating with one another, and also the outside world.

The United States and European governments, as well as NGOs and private sector companies, should do everything in their power to ease this communications embargo. Companies like Siemens-Nokia, which have provided the Iranian government sophisticated technologies used for intelligence gathering and repression, should be publicly shamed and encouraged to donate their business profits from deals with Iran to human rights causes.

- **Don't underestimate the magnitude of this moment**

In an atmosphere of repression and intimidation millions of Iranians throughout the country, representing a diverse swath of society, have taken to the streets since June 12th, agitating for greater political freedoms that many of us take for granted. Having endured a repressive religious autocracy for the last 30 years, Iran is arguably the only country in the Muslim Middle East in which popularly driven change is not of an Islamist, anti-American variety.

While the type of change Iranians seek may continue to prove elusive for months, if not years, we should not underestimate the size, strength, maturity, and resolve of this movement, nor its enormous implications. While this movement must be driven by Iranians themselves, it should remain a U.S. foreign policy imperative not to do anything to deter its success or alter its trajectory. Just as Iran's 1979 revolution dramatically impacted world affairs, so could the emergence of a more moderate, democratic Iranian government at peace with its neighbors and the outside world.