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Why we should still talk with Iran

By Maziar Bahari

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Since I was released from Tehran's notorious Evin Prison last month, the questions have come again and again: Can we still talk to these people? Should the Obama administration engage in dialogue with Iran? What should the West do in nuclear negotiations? After being jailed, interrogated and beaten by the Revolutionary Guards for 118 days for reporting honestly on the disputed June 12 presidential elections, I am often expected to oppose any dialogue. But the West still needs Iran and should continue talking to it -- no matter what it has done to people like me.

Inside Evin, I was forced to confess that I was part of an insidious Western media conspiracy to overthrow the regime. I was forced to apologize to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. I was released as suddenly as I was arrested, without explanation. But my interrogator told me to send a message to the world: "We are a superpower. America's power is waning, and we will soon overtake them. Now that Americans have started this war against us, we will not let them rest in peace." He paused, perhaps realizing that he sounded defensive. I was a jailed journalist wearing a blindfold, not some sort of spy. (I'm not even American.) He changed the subject to "soft" war, a term Tehran uses to refer to an imaginary war that it says is promoted by the media against the "holy government of the Islamic Republic." "We will answer their attacks with all our might," he said.

The Revolutionary Guards are a schizophrenic bunch, plagued by both deep insecurities and a superiority complex. They have ambitions to take over the government and expand their business empire in Iran. At the same time, they are terrified of individuals and groups that question their grip on power. The Guards are the real power base of Khamenei. They are the main supporters of his claim to be Allah's representative on Earth. One of the most serious charges against me was insulting Khamenei. In a private e-mail I had wondered whether Khamenei has been blinded by power and had lost touch with his people, and if that was why he was answering people's peaceful demands with brute force. That was enough for my interrogator to kick and punch me for days and to threaten me with execution.

In Iran's triangle of power -- the Guards, Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- the Guards are becoming stronger than the president and the supreme leader. Some Guards are devoted to Khamenei for religious reasons, but many of them use his status as a religious leader to legitimize their own actions. They also use Ahmadinejad, a former Guard, to increase their political power. The Guards have arms and money. They are the biggest industrial contractors in Iran. They have front companies all over the region and in the West and are involved in smuggling goods into and out of Iran. They answer only to Khamenei.

So can the West, especially the United States, have a dialogue with these people? Yes. Because there is no other choice. The West has to negotiate with Iran on the nuclear program and the stability of Iraq and Afghanistan. Not talking to Tehran doesn't work: The hostile rhetoric and

actions of the Bush administration against even the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami helped the hard-liners to consolidate power. Only by engaging, even with a more radical regime, can the West force Tehran to measure the costs and benefits of dealing with the outside world.

I don't know exactly why I was released, but I can guess. Over four months, my friends and colleagues at Newsweek and elsewhere waged a massive public and private campaign for my release. Around the time that Iran was sitting down in Geneva to discuss the nuclear program, my conditions inside Evin started to improve. One Iranian official told me later that I had "become more of a liability than an asset in jail." At least some elements of the regime still make such rational calculations.

So what should the United States do? First, a nuclear Iran should not be tolerated. Although I believe that Iran will not start attacking other countries the day after it builds the bomb, having the bomb will embolden the Guards to intensify their repression inside the country and regional expansion. The American government should use all of its resources, including President Obama's charm, to persuade allies, especially China and Russia, to work with it to put in place smart sanctions that solely target Iran's nuclear program and do not affect ordinary Iranians.

At the same time the West has to separate the nuclear negotiations from talks about Iraq and Afghanistan. Tehran understands that insecurity in those countries is damaging to itself as well as to the United States. Iran would love to make its help conditional on a grand bargain with the West that would guarantee the security and survival of the regime and preserve its nuclear program. But the better course would be to use cooperation on those two countries as a confidence-building measure in negotiations.

The common perception among my American friends used to be: "If Americans support a certain faction in Iran, it would be easier for the regime to persecute them." That might have been true once. But Iran has entered a new phase. Opposition activists from all walks of life have been accused of being agents of the West. I was accused of working for the CIA simply because I wrote for an American magazine. The rumor du jour in Iran is that Obama and the Guards are reaching a deal to normalize relations, in exchange for which America will ignore human rights abuses in Iran. Hence, the opposition movement's slogan "Obama, either with them or with us." The United States has acted against the interests of the Iranian people in the past. Repeating that mistake for tactical gains would be the biggest mistake of the Obama administration.

As for the Iranian people, the more immediate victims of the brutal regime, we have to think long-term. Our anger should be sublimated into something more positive. We have been brutalized to think of the world in black and white. Seeing the shades of gray can be our strongest weapon against those who would jail, beat and torture us.

Maziar Bahari, a Canadian filmmaker and reporter for Newsweek, was released from Evin Prison on Oct. 17.

BROOKINGS

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Swimming Against the Tide in Tehran

Iran, Middle East Unrest, Middle East, Egypt, Democracy Promotion

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The Chronicle of Higher Education



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Demonstrators marching in a square. A sclerotic and despotic regime employs its thugs to beat them and arrest their leaders. But the brave protestors carry on, calling for the downfall of the regime and the beginning of a new democratic future.

We've seen this movie before, and in Egypt and Tunisia, so far at least, it has had a surprise happy ending. Many U.S. observers look to the hated regime in Tehran as next in line, reasoning that before this latest wave of protest the regime faced demonstrations over its rigging of the 2009 election, and that discontent is only likely to grow. In Iran, however, the picture is grimmer and the odds of revolution lower.

Ironically, the strength of Iran's democratic forces, dubbed the "Green Movement," and their success in mobilizing so many ordinary Iranians in 2009 may prove their downfall. For the Iranian regime, unlike its Arab neighbors, was not surprised that its people would take to the streets. As it showed in 2009 when it killed dozens of demonstrators, the Iranian regime will use as much force as it needs to stay in power.

The same, of course, was said about Ben Ali and Mubarak. But even more so than in Egypt or Tunisia, the Iranian military is tightly bound to the regime. For in reality, Iran has two militaries, with one—the Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC)—dedicated first and foremost to preserving the revolutionary regime from its enemies, including those at home. Many former IRGC leaders hold key political and economic positions in the government of firebrand President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The IRGC and Iran's other security forces are ready. In the 1990s, the regime faced unexpected protests, with Iranians voicing their anger at the country's economic and political malaise and the corruption of the regime. The clerical regime deployed army units to put down the unrest, only to find the soldiers hesitant to pull the trigger if necessary. Unfortunately, the regime learned: It created special police and military units for crowd control, making sure that they remained loyal to the regime over the Iranian people. Ben Ali and Mubarak discovered the need for such units too late.

And while Mubarak and Ben Ali had a small coterie of family and lackeys to help them run the show, Iran's leadership is far broader. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are often criticized by other Iranian elites as well as the people, but Iran's leaders are likely to come together in the face of protests. They see the demonstrators as illegitimate and tools of the West. While they would rather avoid the opprobrium that comes with gunning down hundreds of their own people, they will hang together rather than risk hanging apart.

Ironically, the Obama administration is being, and can be, much bolder in its calls for dramatic change in Iran because Tehran is an adversary and because the United States has little influence. Another irony is that the failure to halt Iran's nuclear program also emboldens the administration. Efforts to engage Iran proved fruitless, so there is less to lose by further alienating the regime. Politically, Obama can only benefit from becoming the champion of democrats against a hated regime, and this will help him deflect any criticism that he was too slow in getting behind the protestors in Egypt's Tahrir Square.

In practice, however, the United States calls for democracy in Iran may have more mixed results. Highlighting the democratic struggle can help shine the spotlight on the demonstrators and raise the diplomatic and political costs to the regime of a crackdown. But U.S. support, even if only rhetorical, will also convince hardliners that the United States is behind the unrest and make them more willing to press the trigger.

The Iranian Nuclear Riddle after June 12

Over the past thirty years, U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran have fluctuated between bad and very bad. The primary issue from the United States' view has been Iran's attempts to overturn the regional order in the Middle East through revolutionary activity. It has now been seven years since the revelations about Iran's undeclared nuclear activities first surfaced. Since then, little discernible progress has been made in uncovering the full scope of Iran's program and whether it includes a weapons program. Attempts since 2002 to roll back or at least slow Iran's nuclear ambitions have proven fruitless, imparting a sense of urgency to the issue. Neither threats of punishment nor inducements have worked. Instead, threats unify Iranians behind an unloved regime while inducements threaten the regime's foundations, which are built on hostility to the world, embattlement, and "resistance." In addition, Iran fears the U.S./West's friendship more than its enmity.

The dilemma today for the United States is that neither the military nor the diplomatic track appears likely to yield results soon. This dilemma is further accentuated since the June 12, 2009 elections highlighted the fractures in Iranian elite, as well as society, and the current regime's sickening repression of the public. The elections also brought forth the regime's newfound interest in at least tactically engaging the West, as in Geneva in October 2009. By engagement, the regime not only hopes to deflect external pressures, but also to gain a measure of legitimacy and to dishearten its political opponents.

Yet, contrary to conventional thinking, Iran's nuclear policy has never been publicly debated and has never enjoyed a national consensus beyond the broad,

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trite slogan of a “right to technology.” Divisions on the nuclear question exist and are in fact a surrogate for a broader question: how should Iran relate to the international community? Differences exist between those who seek a larger role for Iran in the international community as a normal state, accommodating international concerns, and those who wish to acquire a nuclear weapons capability to continue to confront the West, but with an “equalizer.”

There is a diplomatic conundrum in dealing with Iran. Fixing the nuclear issue, however urgent, is a stop-gap solution. Ultimately, concerns about Iran’s nuclear ambitions stem from an absence of trust. This is the product of Iran’s behavior over the past thirty years and the nature of the regime itself, characterized by opacity and subterfuge. Ironically, Tehran recognizes that the real issue is the regime itself. It argues that the West’s focus on the nuclear issue is merely an excuse—an opening wedge—to achieve regime change. This, they conclude, means that any substantive compromise or concession on their part will only lead to a series of escalating demands that will empty Iran of its revolutionary content—in other words, lead to regime change. The implication of this analysis is that everything is connected and that only a “grand bargain” can work. Yet, such a

bargain without a change in the regime’s behavior cannot be feasible.

For the past thirty years, the United States has consistently ignored Iranian domestic politics, alternately denying the existence of (elusive) moderates or dismissing them as ineffectual. U.S.

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policies, assuming a monolithic Iran, have failed to utilize a natural Iranian constituency and on occasion have undermined that constituency’s critiques of Mahmood Ahmadinejad’s policies.¹ While the Obama administration should at least sound out Tehran, it should be under no illusions about the tactical nature of Iran’s current response. Washington should bear in mind that there exist moderate Iranian nationalists who wish to normalize relations with the world on the basis of mutual respect. They are likely to be a more reliable interlocutor, creating a government more plural, responsible, open, tolerant, and trustworthy, and thus partners for a durable and comprehensive agreement. This implies a renewed emphasis by the United States on public diplomacy, informing the Iranian people of the continuing U.S. interest in the fate of democracy, standards of human rights, and establishment of the rule of law in Iran, as elsewhere.

Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics

The 1979 revolution in Iran was brought by a very diverse coalition of secularists and theocrats, the middle class, ideologues, pragmatists, Marxists, and

traditionalists. The only consensus among them was the need for change. In foreign policy, this was expressed as the need for Iran to be independent and to follow its own path: “neither East nor West.” Together with an expression of solidarity for the “oppressed” and sympathy for the non-aligned, these became the principles of Iran’s foreign policy. Iran’s revolutionary mission, often invoked and never defined, developed into an instrument that over time was manipulated by ruling elements to serve their own purposes. Those who differed, or sought a more settled policy, could be easily intimidated.

For self-proclaimed revolutionary regimes like Iran, foreign policy is an expression of its values and a validation of its struggle. Hence, there is an intimate connection between domestic legitimization and foreign policy conduct. Foreign policy and foreign threats are routinely invoked to control domestic politics. In the name of national security, critics can be marginalized, moderates denounced as traitors, and repression justified. Foreign policy, therefore, is at once an extension of domestic politics, an expression of the regime’s identity, and a barometer of its intentions.

Aware of these interconnections, Iran’s leaders have repeatedly sought to inject revolutionary content into policy once the regime’s legitimacy appeared to wane. The hostage crisis of 1979 and the Salman Rushdie *fatwa* of 1989 are two examples. As the regime has found itself unable to deliver in economic performance, it has increasingly resorted to “revolutionary duty” and “Islamic values” to shore it up. In the recent elections, the links between the two were clear. According to Ervand Abrahamian, an Iranian-American historian:

For Iranians, foreign relations were tied to domestic bread and butter questions. It was clear that there would not be jobs for the ever-increasing number of high school and college graduates unless the country’s vast gas and oil reserves were developed. It was equally clear that these reserves would not be developed unless relations with the West—and especially the U.S.—improved.²

Ahmadinejad’s opponents seek to stabilize the system, in contrast, by redefining and reorienting Iran through evolutionary change focusing on public accountability and a more open, normal interaction with a globalized world. For them, this is the path to renewing the legitimacy of the Iranian system that has eroded dangerously. The hard-liners in Iran see this approach as doubly dangerous, for ejecting “revolutionary values” risks losing control and power. Regime survival, equated with their primacy, depends upon embattlement. Legitimacy for them comes not from the citizenry, many of whom advocate accommodation, but from resistance.³ Advocates of moderation, therefore, threaten the control of the hard-liners and their definition of the regime.

Iran's Nuclear Policy

Observers, particularly in Iran, like to depict Iran's nuclear policy as a matter of national consensus.⁴ Foreigners have bought into this, adding that any differences are largely a matter of how policy is conducted, not about ultimate goals. Parallel reasoning is prevalent in Washington: there are no real moderates in Iran. Even if they exist, they are not in power, and even when in office (i.e., Mohammad Khatami, Iranian president from 1997–2005), they are either ineffectual or do not control security issues.

This analysis is faulty. There is a consensus that Iran has a right to *peaceful* nuclear technology.⁵ But Western intelligence attributes *weapons* activities and motives to current policy. Most Iranians also dislike the hectoring and arrogant tone adopted by the United States between 2003 and 2008. Nonetheless, differences in the elite exist not only on how diplomacy is conducted and what purposes nuclear energy is to serve, but also on the price to be paid for this program and its relation to other needs, including relations with the international community.

Washington should be under no illusions about the tactical nature of Iran's current response.

While Iran's leaders invoke a national consensus, there has never been an open debate on the subject. The public has not been consulted while the issue has been treated at the level of slogans. Attempts by some informed elite members to inject a sense of realism into policy has seen them harassed and imprisoned as foreign agents. Ahmadinejad's Supreme National Security Council has issued instructions to the press

on how to report the nuclear issue favorably, suggesting something less than a national consensus.⁶

It is also not correct to argue that there have been no differences between the nuclear policies of Khatami and Ahmadinejad. According to the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), weapons-related activity stopped in 2003.⁷ At the time, Hassan Rowhani, the senior Iranian negotiator, entered into agreement with the European Union foreign ministers, known as the EU-3, and accepted to apply the Additional Protocol and suspend enrichment voluntarily. In doing so, he specifically invoked the need to keep good relations with the international community by reassuring it of Iran's intentions.⁸ When the reformists came under fire for their nuclear policy, they were obliged to defend it in the idiom of Iranian politics, by claiming to defend Iran's rights by stealth. After all, they could not afford to be less nationalist than their critics. Opportunists such as Ali

Larijani, who started to politicize the issue in 2004, did so by arguing that Iran's acceptance of the Additional Protocol had been a unilateral concession.

Conservative criticism of the reformists' alleged policy of "retreat" was taken to a new level by Ahmadinejad from 2005, who factionalized what has allegedly been a national policy, taking the subject to the provinces and depicting it in bumper stickers.⁹ As Iran resumed enrichment, limited the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) inspectors' activities, and threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the question went to the UN Security Council and a series of sanctions were passed in 2007. Ahmadinejad's critics could not afford to be less nationalist, but neither could they deny that standing up to the United States had been a short cut to establishing nationalist credentials.

Consequently, rather than on his goals, Iranian critics focused on Ahmadinejad's adventurous and gratuitously confrontational approach, which imposed unnecessary costs on Iran and threatened the very regime/system (*nezam*) itself. Ahmadinejad, for his part, depicted his critics as foreign agents, and likened the nuclear program to a "train without brakes." As the issue became further heated in Iran, the U.S. government released the 2007 NIE in December, which reduced the credibility of any near-term military option, thus undermining and silencing Ahmadinejad's critics. Confrontation seemed to work for Iran. It was not surprising then that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei approved of Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy and characterized that of his predecessors—which he had, of course, approved—as one of retreat and surrender in the spring of 2008.¹⁰

Despite the NIE and the Bush administration's tendency to utter ineffectual threats, or draw "redlines," which it could not enforce, or threaten to implement sanctions in the Security Council (that were watered down), Iranian conservatives were aided by the oil windfall of 2005–2008 and tacit support from Russia. Serious sanctions appeared remote as the enrichment program briskly advanced from 164 centrifuges in 2003 to some 8000 by mid-2009. Ahmadinejad positioned himself, with implicit approval from Khamenei, to use this policy success to consolidate the hold of the hard-liners in power and to eliminate the moderates' politically.

Yet, a strange thing happened during the recent presidential election. All three candidates criticized Ahmadinejad's foreign policy and distanced themselves from his nuclear policy. They either endorsed the idea of an international consortium for enrichment on Iranian soil (Mohsen Rezaee) or called for further negotiations with the EU (Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi). There was reportedly even a May 2009 proposal by pragmatists that Iran should accept a freeze on its enrichment, which was rejected.¹¹ These proposals were more flexible than the Ahmadinejad ones that had also suggested a willingness to consider other

Legitimacy for Iran's regime comes from resistance.

formulae more acceptable to the international community. All this must have shocked Khamenei, who had specifically endorsed his protégé's policy. Popular opinion seemed to validate this criticism, indicating that the attempt to use the nuclear issue to strengthen hardliners had clearly backfired.¹² There was reason to

suppose that public opinion and the moderate elite did not see any inherent contradiction between Iran's right to enrichment and the international community's right to be reassured of its peaceful intent. This left the suspicion that hardliners were manipulating the issue for both a political and factional advantage.¹³

The contested and fabricated elections and the harsh repression that followed it this past summer has made it clear that the current regime makes no distinction between those acting within and those opposing the system. This makes future criticism of policy inside the country more difficult, as the regime comes to resemble a typical Middle Eastern "security state," quashing any criticism no matter how marginal or fundamental. At the same time, the regime's priorities are clearly now to attend to the polarization of the elite and society, which has weakened and further discredited the regime domestically and internationally. Gone is the recent cocky tone, which had depicted Iran as an island of stability. The United States, however, is facing a similar situation as its power keeps declining due to a variety of reasons.¹⁴

Ahmadinejad has insisted that his activist foreign policy will continue and is in fact necessary for his domestic policies to work. He will continue to challenge the international power structure and the rules of the international system.¹⁵ Iran's initial reply to the P5+1 talks (which includes the five permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—plus Germany) reflects this approach and dealt with generalities rather than the nuclear question, which officially remained "closed." While this does not suggest much departure in policy, Iran's weakened state gives it an incentive to engage the West tactically, if only to deflect the pressure for new sanctions.

The Geneva meeting in early October between Iran and the P5+1 was thus an indication of the regime's realization of the need to respond both to acute domestic divisions and international pressure. The external pressure came from the discovery of its failure to declare a new enrichment site near Qom and from the United States' carefully modulated but clear determination to focus on the nuclear question. Tehran's decision to engage the P5+1 tactically was designed to alleviate these pressures by making limited, procedural concessions. In return,

Tehran expects to deflect sanctions and divert attentions away from its intensified domestic repression.

The regime is eager to isolate its domestic opponents in order to dishearten them and regain whatever legitimacy it imagined it possessed before the watershed events of June 2009. International talks, therefore, may be used as a screen to mask intensified domestic repression. Without making any substantive concessions, by dangling the possibility of improved cooperation with the IAEA or a limited freeze that does not alter its program or its objectives, Tehran may seek to accomplish these more important political goals. At home, it can brag that its hard-line approach made the West acknowledge Iran's nuclear rights without it making any substantive concessions. Iran may, therefore, accept a temporary freeze, which would not alter the fundamentals of its nuclear program or its mastery of enrichment. Any enrichment on Iranian soil will always run the risk of an Iranian decision to "breakout" of the treaty and move toward weapons. What Iran will *not* accept, of course, is a *rollback* of its program.

Engagement: the Response to Iran's Nuclear Policy

Where does this leave the West? On one hand, Iran is moving steadily toward a nuclear capability. On the other, the regime has shown its true and very ugly face in its treatment of its population, further complicating engagement. The U.S./Western policy has to deal with three issues: whether and on what terms to *engage* Iran; whether to resort to further *sanctions* if this proves fruitless; and finally, if an agreement is possible, to deal with the problem of *trust*, which necessarily will underlie any agreement.

The Obama administration's decision to focus on engaging Iran on the nuclear question, brushing aside criticisms that it was providing a lifeline to a vicious, failing regime and selling out Iranian reformists, was courageous. It will be seen to have been a correct one if it gains serious concessions that result in neutralizing the threat of a nuclear Iran. For this to happen, the administration will need to block further enrichment and put in controls on any future Iranian nuclear activities. Iran, however, has shown no sign of being willing to accept either meaningful suspension or highly intrusive inspections. A decision to do so, and to recognize its responsibility to reassure the international community about its program, would entail a strategic shift that would go beyond the nuclear issue alone. More likely, Tehran hopes to buy time, reduce pressures for sanctions, and divert attention away from its increasingly authoritarian politics, all without making significant concessions.

Disclaimers notwithstanding, the decision to negotiate with Iran today inevitably confers a degree of recognition on the regime, which it will not be slow to exploit domestically. There is no gainsaying that the price of engaging Tehran today is selling

out the people who embody hope for change in Iran and are the United States' natural interlocutors. Care needs to be exercised to ensure that any continued engagement with Tehran does not imply endorsement nor confer any form of legitimacy on the Iranian regime. It should rightly be conceived as a process, and not a goal, intended to encourage a change in behavior.¹⁶ Indeed, since meaningful change in behavior would require a change in the regime, engagement should be seen as a means of encouraging regime evolution which will eventually empower those elements in Iran most interested in mutually respectful relations. To this end, the United States should intensify its public diplomacy to communicate its goals and policies to the Iranian people, including any inducement packages offered and refused by the current regime. Emphasis on its concern for Iranian human rights should not be dropped or underplayed to mollify the regime. Indeed the regime's efforts to block information should be countered by every technological means available.¹⁷

Engagement should be seen as a means of encouraging regime evolution.

Sanctions are controversial, but it is difficult to see how they can be discarded as they remain the only policy tool midway between the use of force and toothless protests. The U.S. rationale for sanctions imposed so far has been to impose a cost on Iran's policies and to stimulate an internal Iranian debate and reconsideration of them. In the new context of a disunited Iran, this may be easier to do. To be sure, no one knows whether sanctions benefit the target by rallying support to it or weaken it as public anger is turned against it. Nor do we know who suffers, who evades its consequences, and who benefits from sanctions. It is very clear that sanctions can have more effect over time and cumulatively rather than in the short term. Also, states that are resourceful, or have friends or foreign exchange, can usually evade the full effect of sanctions, especially if they are not universally applied. That said, sanctions do have an effect on the margins, and to an extent, they highlight the sanctioned state's unacceptable policies as well as its relative isolation, sending a message to its people about its government's policies. Iranians have made it clear that they do not want pariah status and the current regime has to take the blame for it.

Finally, any agreement, however limited in scope and time, will depend in large measure on trust, even if intrusive inspections are included. Yet, as suggested at the outset, it is precisely the question of confidence that is lacking given the regime's past behavior. In light of the falsified elections and aftermath, there are more reasons to be skeptical of the value of any agreement made with Tehran today.¹⁸ Indeed, the degree of assurance required now would entail the most intrusive form of inspections currently in existence anywhere. This, in itself, would be an argument for rejecting it in Tehran.

A different regime, more accountable and transparent, would be a more satisfactory interlocutor, more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, and able to conclude a more durable agreement. One cannot choose one's negotiating partner, but it is as well to recognize that the heart of the problem with Iran goes to the regime itself and especially those elements in it that resist its evolution toward normalization, a wish the majority of the Iranian people have supported. For them, hopes for a better future revolve around normalization. The events of 2009 have only underscored this yearning.

The United States will therefore need to balance its own concern to stop the nuclear clock in Iran with its broader objective of stabilizing the Middle East. Iranians in Iran will have to determine their own future, and recent events have shown that, while they seek independence, they also seek freedom, along with a government that they can hold accountable. This is consistent with U.S. values and very much in the interests of both countries. It would be advisable for the United States to keep this broader objective in mind while dealing with the nuclear issue.

Notes

1. National Intelligence Estimate [NIE], *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, November 2007), http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf.
2. Ervand Abrahamian, "I am not a speck of dirt, I am a retired teacher," *London Review of Books*, July 23, 2009, p. 34.
3. Polls frequently attest to the public desire from all groups within Iran for normal relations with the United States. See Alvin Richman, David Nolle, and Elaine El Assai, "Iranian Public Is Not Monolithic: Iranians Divide Over Their Government But Unite on Forgoing Nuclear Weapons," *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, May 18, 2009, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/incl/printable_version.php?pnt=609 (hereinafter *WorldPublicOpinion Poll*); Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty "The Iranian People Speak," *The Muslim Observer*, June 15, 2009, <http://muslimmedianetwork.com/mmn/?p=4206>.
4. See Kayhan Barzegar "The Paradox of Iran's Nuclear Consensus," *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 21–30. Well intentioned foreigners have bought into the argument that the nuclear program reflects a quest for respect after years of humiliation, depicting it as a "quasi holy symbol." This is wide off the mark. See Roger Cohen, "The U.S.-Iranian Triangle," *New York Times*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/28/opinion/28iht-edcohen.html>.
5. *WorldPublicOpinion Poll*; Ballen and Doherty "The Iranian People Speak."
6. An example is Hossein Mousavian, a former nuclear negotiator, who attempted to outline the dangers of having the issue referred to UN Security Council, and was subsequently harassed. For the press restrictions directive, see "Iranian Regime Instructs Press on How to Report on Nuclear Issue and Iraq," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, no. 1899 (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Media Research Institute, April 16, 2008), <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=sd&ID=SP189908&Page=archives>. Also note

- how debate on policy has been inhibited. A prominent reformist commentator noted that it has become an untouchable issue: "It is forbidden to talk about nuclear policy—you cannot oppose it in any way." See Anna Fifield "Iran's Nuclear Ambition Rises Above Domestic Debate," *Financial Times*, February 19, 2008, http://us.ft.com/ftgateway/superpage.ft?news_id=fto021920081219509066.
7. NIE, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*.
 8. See Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2006).
 9. See Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*; Shahram Chubin, "Iran: Domestic Politics and Nuclear Choices" in *Strategic Asia 2007-08*, eds. Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills (Seattle: National Bureau of Research, 2007), pp. 299–338; Shahram Chubin, "Understanding Iran's Nuclear Ambitions" in *Double Trouble*, ed. Patrick Cronin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), pp. 47–62.
 10. "Resistance Led to Great Nuclear Victory," *Tehran Times*, February 27, 2008; Daniel Dombey and Harvey Morris, "U.S. Sees Tehran Nuclear Dispute Going into 2009," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2008, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4bfc2bf6-e4d7-11dc-a495-0000779fd2ac.html?ncklick_check=1.
 11. See "Iran Rejected Internal Call for Nuclear Freeze, Diplomats Claim," Global Security Newswire, August 27, 2009, http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20090827_7250.php.
 12. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Farideh Farhi, "Ahmadinejad's Nuclear Folly," *Middle East Report*, no. 252 (Fall 2009), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer252/farhi.html>.
 13. This is a suspicion that is likely to have increased since June 2009. See Meir Javedanfar, "Iran's Crisis Has Nuclear Fallout," *Guardian*, July 19, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/19/iran-nuclear-programme>.
 14. See Christopher de Bellaigue, "Obama's Iranian Charm Offensive," *Prospect*, June 2009, p. 57.
 15. See Farhi, "Ahmadinejad's Nuclear Folly."
 16. See Chester A. Crocker, "Terms of Engagement," *New York Times*, September 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/opinion/14crocker.html>.
 17. For a similar proposal, see Michael Singh, "Broadening the U.S. Approach to Iran," *PolicyWatch*, no. 1578 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 15, 2009), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3116>.
 18. See, for example, the cartoonist Chappate, who depicted Ahmadinejad addressing two glum, bloodstained clerics by stating: "After the free and fair elections, let's get back to our peaceful nuclear projects." See *International Herald Tribune*, July 8, 2009, p. 7. President Nicolas Sarkozy noted: "It's the same Iranian leaders who tell us that the nuclear program is peaceful who tell us that their elections were honest. Who can believe them?" See "Iran Rejected Internal Call for Nuclear Freeze, Diplomats Claim," Global Security Newswire, August 27, 2009, http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20090827_7250.php.



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SNAPSHOT

Green Movement 2.0?

How U.S. Support Could Lead the Opposition to Victory

Geneive Abdo

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Taking a cue from the Egyptian revolution, opposition activists in Iran reinvigorated their beleaguered movement on Monday, getting thousands of protesters onto the streets despite the regime's year-long crackdown and ban on demonstrations. Their chants were telling. Referring to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, demonstrators chanted, "Mubarak, Ben Ali -- it's your turn, Seyyed Ali!" and "Whether Cairo or Tehran, death to tyrants!" In an interview posted on [InsideIran.org](#) [2], a student who helped organize the protests said, "People don't realize how tense the situation is in Tehran. It is a powder keg and only needs a trigger."

Such sentiments were similar to those in 2009, when Iran also seemed on the verge of change after the so-called Green Movement took to the streets to protest President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection. At the time, members of the Green Movement were conflicted about whether an endorsement from the United States would help or hurt their cause. And for its part, Washington was hesitant to support the movement, fearing that it might taint the opposition if its involvement created the impression that the United States was behind the protests. In the end, the state cracked down, the protests lost momentum, and the movement failed.

The uprising in Egypt has put to rest some of the Iranian opposition's fears: observing the support U.S. President Barack Obama gave Egyptians at critical moments in their three-week uprising, many Iranian activists were convinced that Obama's backing of their cause would give the opposition the push it needs to confront its authoritarian rulers over the long haul. Of course, Obama waited days to endorse the Egyptian uprising, but when he did it sent the message that the United States would not pressure Egypt's military to keep former President Hosni Mubarak in power. This alone heartened Egypt's opposition. A similar endorsement could do the same for Iran's.

It is also far less true today than in 2009 that U.S. support would tarnish Iran's opposition movement: it is already clear that the Egyptian uprising and revolts unfurling across the Arab world are popular, local, and independent of the United States. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether the United States is prepared to lend the same support to

the Green Movement that it did to the Egyptian protesters. Many inside the Washington Beltway believe that, despite the current flare-up, the Green Movement is long dead and not worth the risk of further alienating the Iranian regime. But the United States was too quick to write off the Green Movement in 2009 in the first place. Fundamental change takes time and, more than a lack of will, the Green Movement is plagued by a lack of means to confront a security apparatus far more effective and brutal than that in Egypt. Indeed, Iranians may need U.S. support to face their regime more than the Egyptians did.

After the protests in 2009, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps established a cyber defense command to counter online political activism, making Facebook and Twitter inaccessible to those without filter proxies bought in the West. On Monday, the regime banned Iranians from organizing; blocked BBC Persian, a main source of information in Iran (much as Al Jazeera is in the Arab world); and put the de facto leaders of the Green Movement under house arrest. Iranian leaders have announced that they will create a special court focusing on "media crimes," a move that will surely deter even more journalists and citizens from using the Internet to disseminate information about the protests. Even the regime's moderate conservatives, such as Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani, have been quick to demand that opposition leaders face trial for the most recent protests, some even calling for their execution. Of course, the Egyptian government also shut down the Internet -- but only for one day during the heat of the protests. And unlike Egypt's military, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard cannot be counted on to sit on the sidelines.

Even so, tens of thousands of Iranians reportedly protested on February 14. But if world leaders were to support civil disobedience, for example by making sophisticated technology available to Iranians to counter the regime's manipulation of the internet, the momentum could build for future demonstrations even if the violent security forces started to crack down.

At the moment, Iran's opposition is far less unified in its goals than the Egyptian opposition was during its protests. Some factions want only to reform Iran's theocracy, while others (particularly the younger activists) want to dismantle supreme clerical rule altogether and establish a parliamentary democracy. The West's endorsement of the movement could strengthen Iran's opposition as a whole but only as long as Washington does not talk of trying to supplant the regime with a Western-style democracy. The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have made clear that Egypt will be a democracy that reflects the religious and cultural values of Egypt, and the United States should not try to dictate Iran's future form of governance.

Washington's public support, moreover, would deprive the Iranian regime of one of its weapons: anti-Americanism. For example, the Iranian government has tried to convince its people that U.S. sanctions are designed to hurt them, not the regime. Some Iranians have been left believing that the United States cares more about security issues -- in particular preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon -- than their well-being. But far from wanting the United States to back off entirely, a majority say that they would like closer ties with the West, according to a recent poll from the International Peace Institute.

To be sure, Washington has started to take a firmer stance against the Iranian regime as uprisings sweep through the Middle East. U.S. officials have even said that tougher rhetoric will now be part of Washington's official approach toward the country. And this is indeed a shift in policy; in 2009, the United States resisted even rhetorical support for the demonstrators. Speaking this week about Monday's protests, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "There needs to be a commitment to open up the political system in Iran to hear the voices of the opposition and civil society." U.S. officials have also noted the hypocrisy of the Iranian regime's support for the Egyptian uprising.

Throughout Egypt's revolt, Iran's leaders praised the uprising as part of a new "Islamic awakening" in the region, crediting the unrest to their own 1979 revolution. In a statement condemning Iran's blocking of BBC Persian, Tommy Vietor, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said, "For all of its empty talk about Egypt, the government of Iran should allow the Iranian people the same universal right to peacefully assemble, demonstrate, and communicate in Tehran that the people are exercising in Cairo."

Opposition activists are seeking much more. They want the international community to draw attention to Iran's human rights violations. Indeed, in the International Peace Institute poll, 55 percent of all respondents said that the West should speak out against the regime's human rights violations. This is an area in which the government is vulnerable. Iran has managed to convince at least a sizable portion of the population that the crackdown and repression after the 2009 movement have been necessary to preserve the country. If the United States makes clear that it condemns repression and supports the aspirations of the Iranian people, it could inspire young non-ideological Iranians -- who have much in common with their Egyptian counterparts -- to confront the security forces. One step further, which some U.S. senators have already backed, would be to establish an independent UN human rights monitor to track the situation in Iran and publicize violations.

Iranians look with sadness and regret as they see Arabs liberating themselves from long-standing dictatorships. "For the first time in history, the Iranians are envious of the Arabs," said one activist, referring to Persians' historic sense of superiority to Arab countries. But Monday's demonstrations, just like those in 2009, are giving the Iranian opposition hope again. This time, with talks over Iran's nuclear program at a stalemate and fears of tainting the movement gone, there should be no debate about endorsing it. In a not-so-subtle rebuke during a visit to Tehran on Monday, Turkish President Abdullah Gül said that "without exception" all states in the Middle East must listen to their people and implement their demands. And if even Iran's allies can stand behind the protesters, the United States should be able to as well. At any rate, the more pressure the Iranian regime encounters from all angles, the more tools the opposition will have to confront the regime.

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Obama Is Helping Iran

How Washington's awkward handling of Middle East uprisings is playing into the hands of the Islamic Republic.

BY FLYNT AND HILLARY MANN LEVERETT | FEBRUARY 23, 2011



We take billionaire financier George Soros up on **the bet** he proffered to CNN's Fareed Zakaria this week that "the Iranian regime will not be there in a year's time." In fact, we want to up the ante and wager that not only will the Islamic Republic still be Iran's government in a year's time, but that a year from now, the balance of influence and power in the Middle East will be tilted more decisively in Iran's favor than it ever has been.

Just a decade ago, on the eve of the 9/11 attacks, the United States had cultivated what American policymakers like to call a strong "moderate" camp in the region, encompassing states reasonably well-disposed toward a negotiated peace with Israel and strategic cooperation with Washington: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf states, as well as Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey. On the other side, the Islamic Republic had an alliance of some standing with Syria, as well as ties to relatively weak militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. Other "radical" states like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Muammar al-Qaddafi's Libya were even more isolated.

Fast-forward to the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration as president of the United States, in January 2009. As a foreignpolicy.com/.../obama_is_helping...

result of the Iraq war, the collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and some fairly astute diplomacy by Iran and its regional allies, the balance of influence and power across the Middle East had shifted significantly against the United States. Scenarios for "weaning" Syria away from Iran were becoming ever more fanciful as relations between Damascus and Tehran became increasingly strategic in quality. Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), was charting a genuinely independent foreign policy, including strategically consequential partnerships with Iran and Syria. Hamas and Hezbollah, legitimated by electoral successes, had emerged as decisively important political actors in Palestine and Lebanon. It was looking progressively less likely that post-Saddam Iraq would be a meaningful strategic asset for Washington and ever more likely that Baghdad's most important relationships would be with Iran, Syria, and Turkey. And, increasingly, U.S. allies like Oman and Qatar were aligning themselves with the Islamic Republic and other members of the Middle East's "resistance bloc" on high-profile issues in the Arab-Israeli arena -- as when the Qatari emir flew to Beirut a week after the 2006 Lebanon war to pledge massive reconstruction assistance to Hezbollah strongholds in the south and publicly defended Hezbollah's retention of its military capabilities.

On Obama's watch, the regional balance of influence and power has shifted even further away from the United States and toward Iran and its allies. The Islamic Republic has continued to deepen its alliances with Syria and Turkey and expand its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. Public **opinion polls**, for example, continue to show that the key leaders in the Middle East's resistance bloc -- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Syrian President Bashar Assad, Lebanon's Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas's Khaled Mishaal, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- are all vastly more popular across the region than their counterparts in closely U.S.-aligned and supported regimes in Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Saudi Arabia.

And, now, the Obama administration stands by helplessly as new openings for Tehran to reset the regional balance in its favor emerge in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and perhaps elsewhere. If these "pro-American" Arab political orders currently being challenged or upended by significant protest movements become at all more representative of their populations, they will no doubt become less enthusiastic about strategic cooperation with the United States. And, if these "pro-American" regimes are not replaced by *salafi*-dominated Islamist orders, the Arab governments that emerge from the present turmoil are likely to be at least somewhat receptive to Iran's message of "resistance" and independence from Israel and the West.

Certainly, any government in Cairo that is even mildly more representative than Hosni Mubarak's regime will not be willing to keep collaborating with Israel to enforce the siege of Gaza or to continue participating in the CIA's rendition program to bring Egyptians back to Egypt to be tortured. Likewise, any political order in Bahrain that respected the reality of that country's Shiite-majority population would be firmly opposed to the use of its territory as a platform for U.S. military action against Iranian interests.

Over the next year, all these developments will shift the regional balance even more against the United States and in favor of Iran. If Jordan -- a loyal U.S. client state -- were to come into play during this period, that would tilt things even further in Iran's direction.

Against this, Soros, other American elites, the media, and the Obama administration all assert that the wave of

popular unrest that is taking down one U.S. ally in the Middle East after another will now bring down the Islamic Republic -- and perhaps the Assad government in Syria, too. This is truly a triumph of wishful thinking over thoughtful analysis.

Many of these same actors, of course, worked themselves up into quite a frenzy after the Islamic Republic's June 2009 presidential election. For months, we were subjected to utterly unsubstantiated claims that the election had been stolen and that the Green Movement would sweep aside the Iranian "regime." Like Soros today, many pundits who predicted the Islamic Republic's demise in 2009 or 2010 put various time frames on their predictions -- all of which, to the best of our knowledge, have passed without the Iranian system imploding. (But don't worry about the devastating impact of such egregious malpractice on the careers of those who proved themselves so manifestly incompetent at Iran analysis. In today's accountability-free America, every one of the Iran "experts" who were so wrong about the Green Movement in 2009 and 2010 is **back at it again**.)

From literally the day after Iran's 2009 presidential election, we **pointed out** that the Green Movement could not succeed in bringing down the Islamic Republic, for two basic reasons: The movement did not represent anything close to a majority of Iranian society, and a majority of Iranians still support the idea of an Islamic Republic. Two additional factors are in play today, which make it even less likely that those who organized and participated in **scattered demonstrations** in Iran over the past week will be able to catalyze "regime change" there.

First, what is left of the Green Movement represents an even smaller portion of Iranian society than it did during the summer and fall of 2009. The failures of defeated presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi to convincingly document their assertions of electoral fraud and the Green Movement's pivotal role in the West's progressive demonization of the Islamic Republic since June 2009 have not played well with most Iranians inside Iran. That's why, for example, former President Mohammad Khatami has quietly distanced himself from what is left of the Green Movement -- as has every reformist politician who wants to have a political future in the Islamic Republic. As a result of these highly consequential miscalculations by the opposition's ostensible leaders, those who want to try again to organize a mass movement against the Islamic Republic have a much smaller pool of troops that they might potentially be able to mobilize. This is not a winning hand, even in an era of Facebook and Twitter.

Second, the effort to restart protests in Iran is taking place at a moment of real strategic opportunity for Tehran in the Middle East. The regional balance is shifting, in potentially decisive ways, in favor of the Islamic Republic and against its American adversary. In this context, for Mousavi and Karroubi to **call their supporters into the streets** on Feb. 14 -- just three days after the Obama administration had started issuing its own **exhortations** for Iranians to revolt against their government and as Obama and his national security team reeled from the loss of Mubarak, America's longtime ally in Egypt -- was an extraordinary blunder.

The Iranian people are not likely to recognize as their political champions those whom they increasingly perceive as working against the national interest. Two of Ahmadinejad's most prominent conservative opponents -- former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and former Revolutionary Guard commander and presidential

candidate Mohsen Rezai -- have **publicly** and **severely** criticized Mousavi and Karroubi over their recent actions and statements. Parliament speaker Ali Larijani, another Ahmadinejad opponent, **told his colleagues** last week, "The parliament condemns the Zionists, American, anti-revolutionary, and anti-national action of the misled seditionists," accusing the two Green Movement leaders of falling into "the orchestrated trap of America."

U.S. attempts to intervene in the Islamic Republic's internal politics are typically maladroit and often backfire. But the Obama administration's performance is setting new standards in this regard. Among other consequences, the administration's latest initiative to stir up unrest in Iran will put what is left of the reform camp in Iranian politics at an even bigger disadvantage heading into parliamentary elections next year and the Islamic Republic's next presidential election in 2013, because reformists are now in danger of being associated with an increasingly marginalized and discredited opposition movement that is, effectively, doing America's bidding.

At a more strategic level, the Obama administration's post-Ben Ali, post-Mubarak approach to Iran is putting important U.S. interests in serious jeopardy. It is putting at risk, first of all, the possibility of dealing constructively with an increasingly influential Islamic Republic in Iran. More broadly, at precisely the time when the United States needs to figure out how to deal with legitimate, genuinely independent Islamist movements and political orders, which are the most likely replacements for "pro-American" autocracies across the Middle East, the Obama administration's approach to Iran is taking U.S. policy in exactly the opposition direction.

The United States faces serious challenges in the Middle East. Its strategic position in this vital part of the world is eroding before our eyes. Indulging in fantasies about regime change in Iran will only make the situation worse.

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New Republic: Iran Green Movement Needs Water

by **ABBAS MILANI**

Enlarge

Getty Images/Getty Images

Iranians carry a large green flag through the crowd as they demonstrate in the streets on June 15, 2009 in Tehran, Iran to protest the re-election of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

February 25, 2011

text size **A A A**

Abbas Milani is a New Republic contributing editor and the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford.

When protests erupted on the Iranian streets in 2009, President Obama adopted a deliberately cautious tone. Mindful of the fact that he was simultaneously trying to convince the regime to abandon its nuclear program — and afraid that his open support would make an indigenous revolt seem like a tool of foreign influence — the president condemned the use of violence against the Green Movement, but stopped short of backing their heartfelt calls for freedom and democracy.

And again on Feb. 14, many of Iran's major cities were rocked by thousands of brave and determined demonstrators, who defied a government ban on protest and took to the streets. This time, Obama has gone further: He has offered "moral support" and, for the first time, his national security adviser has issued a statement supporting the Iranian democrats. But the president has yet to appreciate the potential impact that a truly vigorous, full-throated, forceful stand in favor of the Green Movement could have on the Middle East at this moment — because the hypocrisy of the Iranian regime is currently on display like never before.

The latest protests were the first time that Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the Green Movement's leaders who had called for the demonstration, openly engaged in an act of civil disobedience, inviting their followers to come out in spite of a threatening government ban. It was whispered on many Iranian websites and blogs that the reason Egypt's million demonstrators could bring down their government, while Iran's three million could not, was that the Green Movement had been truly green and inexperienced: They had simply demanded reforms, whereas it should have been clear even in 2009 that no credible reform was possible within the existing structure of power.

Khamenei and his cohorts responded with maximum force. More than 200 members of the *Majlis*, Iran's parliament, turned the supposedly dignified setting into a scene more reminiscent of the beer gardens filled with brawling Brownshirts. These "lawmakers" gathered in a circle, shouting and demanding the death of opposition leaders, Mousavi, Karroubi, and even Khatami, who had nothing to do with the demonstrations. A sudden, remarkable surge in the number of executions occurred in Iran's jails, obviously calculated to frighten people from participating in any future demonstrations. *Everyone* in a key position of power, and even those who had retired, was forced to issue a statement supporting Khamenei. (The uniformity of these announcements was startlingly similar to the hackneyed shows of fidelity "to the party" under Stalin or Mao.) And in the days following the demonstrations, the regime shamelessly announced that 1,500 people had been arrested. Afraid of the repercussions of either arresting Mousavi and Karroubi or of

leaving them free to continue their open defiance, the regime has now put Karroubi, Mousavi, and his wife, Rahnavard, under house arrest.

Most striking about this horrifying crackdown was the hypocrisy of the Iranian government's rhetoric. Worried that developments in Egypt and Tunisia would invigorate Iranian democrats, the regime offered a counter-narrative that argued that these events were actually reverberations of the 1979 Revolution. The fact that the official site of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has more than once rejected Khamenei's claim, insisting that Egypt is experiencing a democratic and *not* an Islamic revolution; the fact that the head of Tunisian Islamic forces declared, upon returning to his country after twenty years of exile, that he is neither a Khomeini nor a bin Laden; and finally the fact that the Al Azhar, the oldest university in the world, and the most important center of Sunni theology in the world, issued a statement condemning Khamenei's interference in the domestic affairs of Egypt, and condemning the Iranian regime's abuse of Islam and the Quran, have not deterred the Iranian regime from repeating its illusory claims. It mattered little to the Iranian regime that, during the same period where it was shooting members of the Green Movement in the streets, it was demanding that the Bahraini government respect its people's right to demonstrate, and it had spent the last several weeks lambasting Mubarak for using violence against his people.

The regime's Orwellian cynicism became even more apparent in its response to the news that two young members of the opposition had been killed in Tehran by security agents. From reading opposition websites, I was able to glean what happened: The regime virtually abducted the bodies of those two young men it had killed, and had its thugs act as pallbearers, while shouting anti-opposition slogans. When pictures of one of the dead activists surfaced, providing incontrovertible evidence of the young man's close collaboration with the Mousavi campaign, and when his brother declared categorically that his brother was with the opposition, Hussein Shariatmadari, a close confidante of Khamenei and the editor of *Keyhan* (the mouthpiece of Khamenei), came up with the bizarre story that the activists had actually been Shariatmadari's "double agents." The brother who dared defy Big Brother's new "truth" was of course put in jail. In Persian, *mordeh-khori* is a pejorative, denoting those who try to pinch parasitical benefit from the martyrdom of others; as one website close to the opposition described it, this is a novel form of *mordeh-khori*, "murderers mourning the death of their victims."

Regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran, which base their survival on fear and intimidation, constantly face the danger of that elusive moment when suddenly the once intimidated masses lose their fear. The Iranian people, three-fifths of whom are under the age of 30, and more than 30 million of whom are connected to the Internet, are clearly searching for that moment, and testing the limits of the security forces' fealty to the current regime. The recent report that some commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have, in the last week, written a letter to their superiors indicating an unwillingness to shoot at the people is, if true, the first credible crack in the pillars of the regime's apparatus of operation. Other parts of the security apparatus — the *Artesh* (or military) and the police — have already shown signs of unwillingness to participate in the murder of their fellow citizens. It is also not clear how many of the hundreds of thousands of *basijis* — gangs-cum-militia — who joined that organization primarily to benefit from the "perks" of membership, will kill their neighbors or family. And the fact that the powerful Ayatollah Rafsanjani, in spite of increasing pressure on him to clearly side with Khamenei, has still refused to do so further indicates the depth of the fissures within the clerical establishment.

Thus, it is time to speak up for democratization. With the hypocrisy of the Iranian regime so exposed, President Obama should no longer be worried that full-throated rhetorical and political support for the protesters could redound against the United States. And now that the international community is united around sanctioning Iran for its nuclear activities, there is less need for Obama to assure Khamenei that he does not want regime change. Along with other members of the international community — particularly

Turkey — the United States should further isolate the regime, thus serving notice to them that continued brutality against the people will beget it a fate similar to South Africa. (Turkey, too, must be reminded that it cannot be the leader of a democratic Middle East while embracing the region's most brutal regime.)

It is by no means clear that the government in Tehran will crumble next week, next month, or even in the next decade — yet the same thing could have been said about Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, ten years, a month, or even a week ago. Moreover, the benefits for the Middle East could be truly breathtaking: With Egypt on a perilous path to possible democracy, and with Turkey already a working democratic polity, the advent of democracy in Iran could easily tip the regional balance toward democracy, rule of law, and reason. By supporting the Green Movement along with other liberal movements throughout the Middle East, Obama can help to make it so.

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February 23, 2011

Arab Unrest Propels Iran as Saudi Influence Declines

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

MANAMA, Bahrain — The popular revolts shaking the Arab world have begun to shift the balance of power in the region, bolstering [Iran's](#) position while weakening and unnerving its rival, [Saudi Arabia](#), regional experts said.

While it is far too soon to write the final chapter on the uprisings' impact, Iran has already benefited from the ouster or undermining of Arab leaders who were its strong adversaries and has begun to project its growing influence, the analysts said. This week Iran sent two warships through the Suez Canal for the first time since its revolution in 1979, and Egypt's new military leaders allowed them to pass.

Saudi Arabia, an American ally and a Sunni nation that jousts with Shiite Iran for regional influence, has been shaken. King Abdullah on Wednesday signaled his concern by announcing a \$10 billion increase in welfare spending to help young people marry, buy homes and open businesses, a gesture seen as trying to head off the kind of unrest that fueled protests around the region.

King Abdullah then met with the king of [Bahrain](#), [Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa](#), to discuss ways to contain the political uprising by the Shiite majority there. The Sunni leaders in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain accuse their Shiite populations of loyalty to Iran, a charge rejected by Shiites who say it is intended to stoke sectarian tensions and justify opposition to democracy.

The uprisings are driven by domestic concerns. But they have already shredded a regional paradigm in which a trio of states aligned with the West supported engaging Israel and containing Israel's enemies, including [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#), experts said. The pro-engagement camp of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia is now in tatters. [Hosni Mubarak](#) of Egypt has been forced to resign, King Abdullah of Jordan is struggling to control discontent in his kingdom and Saudi Arabia has been left alone to face a rising challenge to its regional role.

"I think the Saudis are worried that they're encircled — Iraq, Syria, Lebanon; Yemen is unstable; Bahrain is very uncertain," said Alireza Nader, an expert in international affairs with

the RAND Corporation. "They worry that the region is ripe for Iranian exploitation. Iran has shown that it is very capable of taking advantage of regional instability."

"Iran is the big winner here," said a regional adviser to the United States government who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

Iran's circumstances could change, experts cautioned, if it overplayed its hand or if popular Arab movements came to resent Iranian interference in the region. And it is by no means assured that pro-Iranian groups would dominate politics in Egypt, Tunisia or elsewhere.

For now, Iran and Syria are emboldened. Qatar and Oman are tilting toward Iran, and Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen are in play.

"If these 'pro-American' Arab political orders currently being challenged by significant protest movements become at all more representative of their populations, they will for sure become less enthusiastic about strategic cooperation with the United States," Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, former [National Security Council](#) staff members, wrote in an e-mail.

They added that at the moment, Iran's leaders saw that "the regional balance is shifting, in potentially decisive ways, against their American adversary and in favor of the Islamic Republic." Iran's standing is stronger in spite of its challenges at home, with a troubled economy, high unemployment and a determined political opposition.

The United States may also face challenges in pressing its case against Iran's nuclear programs, some experts asserted.

"Recent events have also taken the focus away from [Iran's nuclear program](#) and may make regional and international consensus on sanctions even harder to achieve," Mr. Nader said. Iran's growing confidence is based on a gradual realignment that began with the aftershocks of the Sept. 11 attacks. By ousting the [Taliban](#) in Afghanistan, and then [Saddam Hussein](#) in Iraq, the United States removed two of Iran's regional enemies who worked to contain its ambitions. Today, Iran is a major player in both nations, an unintended consequence.

Iran demonstrated its emboldened attitude this year in Lebanon when its ally, Hezbollah, forced the collapse of the pro-Western government of [Saad Hariri](#). Mr. Hariri was replaced with a prime minister backed by Hezbollah, a bold move that analysts say was undertaken with Iran's support.

"Iraq and Lebanon are now in Iran's sphere of influence with groups that have been supported by the hard-liners for decades," said Muhammad Sahimi, an Iran expert in Los Angeles who frequently writes about Iranian politics. "Iran is a major player in Afghanistan. Any regime that

eventually emerges in Egypt will not be as hostile to Hamas as Mubarak was, and Hamas has been supported by Iran. That may help Iran to increase its influence there even more.”

Iran could also benefit from the growing assertiveness of Shiites in general. Shiism is hardly monolithic, and Iran does not speak on behalf of all Shiites. But members of that sect are linked by faith and by their strong sense that they have been victims of discrimination by the Sunni majority. Events in Bahrain illustrate that connection well.

Bahrain has about 500,000 citizens, 70 percent of them Shiite. The nation has been ruled by a Sunni family since it was captured from the Persians in the 18th century. The Shiites have long argued that they are discriminated against in work, education and politics. Last week, they began a public uprising calling for democracy, which would bring them power. The government at first used lethal force to try to stop the opposition, killing seven. It is now calling for a dialogue while the protesters, turning out in huge numbers, are demanding the government's resignation.

But demonstrators have maintained their loyalty to Bahrain. The head of the largest Shiite party, Al Wefaq, said that the party rejected Iran's type of Islamic government. On Tuesday, a leading member of the party, Khalil Ebrahim al-Marzooq, said he was afraid that the king was trying to transform the political dispute into a sectarian one. He said there were rumors the king would open the border with Saudi Arabia and let Sunni extremists into the country to attack the demonstrators.

“The moment that any border opens by the government, means the other borders will open,” he said. “You don't expect people will see their similar sect being killed and not interfere. We will not call them.”

But, he said, they will come.

Nadim Audi contributed reporting.