



***In the Name of the Iranian People
- Regime Change or Regime Reform?***

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The Bush Administration has been without an Iran policy since it took office in January 2001. The containment policy it inherited from the Clinton Administration was under review when the tragedy of September 11 occurred. The US then drifted toward the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and declared Iran as belonging to an “Axis of Evil.” However, as Iran’s nuclear crisis became more global, the Administration refocused attention on Iran. The broad contours of an Iran policy were outlined by Secretary Condoleezza Rice and two senior officials of the State Department on 15 February 2006. Dr. Rice made her remarks at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the officials briefed the media.¹

The new Iran policy is said to differ from the previous policy in two significant ways: It distinguishes the “Islamic regime” from the “Iranian people,” and it focuses on changing (some say reforming) the Islamic regime, rather than its behavior. In short, it is a regime change (or regime reform) policy in the name of the Iranian people. On a practical level, the policy relies on international isolation and domestic destabilization of the Islamic regime. The dual pressure is expected to make the system collapse, or bend, hereby delaying or preventing Iran from building nuclear bombs, or making a prospective nuclear Iran safer.

This Iran policy is part of a new “transformational diplomacy” that Secretary Rice is promoting within the Administration, and marks a shift in the US approach to Iran, from a reactive to a proactive diplomacy. Specifically, Secretary Rice has made a number of long-overdue decisions to rebuild the American capacity to deal constructively with Iran, such as establishing Farsi-designated positions after years of neglect. The new Office of Iran Affairs is another example of a more proactive approach to Iran. One hopes that these developments would lead to a much needed insightful understanding of Iran and to proper strategies and tactics.

There is serious concern that the Bush Administration might at some point opt for a military solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis before it “exhausts” all other available options. The President and some in the Congress have repeatedly said that the use of force remains “a last option.” Meanwhile, former and current Israeli officials have called for immediate military strikes against Iran, with the tacit approval of Vice President Richard Cheney; some have even revealed “Israeli plans” for the purpose. I have argued in previous articles that the road to the UN Security Council can logically lead to war, and that our current complacency could prove disastrous.ⁱⁱ

However, in the present article I am focusing on the new Iran policy, which takes a long view of Iran. As such, it can help postpone or diffuse the military option and give democracy time to



develop. Meanwhile, the equivocal position of the State Department between regime change and regime reform will encourage further debate, giving the proponents a chance to advance the policy, and the opponents an opportunity to voice dissenting views. Even if the Administration likes to think that the new policy is appropriate, and its position does have support among neoconservatives, many Iran experts and US allies remain unconvinced.

In what follows, I will offer an exposition of the new policy, critically evaluate its key assumptions and initiatives, explain the difficulties implementing the policy will face, explicate its pros and cons for the pro-democracy Iranians, and offer an alternative perspective on how the US might help reform the Iranian regime without presenting itself as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic. I shall draw from past US experiences with dictatorships that became democracies in Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

Between Regime Change and Regime Reform

The new Iran policy is a response to the “defiant” mood of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom one official called a “terrorist,” which is unprecedented in US comments on the leadership of the Islamic Republic. The policy is also designed to reduce Israel’s insistence on immediate military action against Iran, put additional pressure on the EU, Russia, and China, among others, to stay the course with the US, and embolden the opposition to the regime at home and abroad to more forcefully confront the regime. What is more, the policy is expected to gain the support of the Iranian people as the US targets the Islamic regime.

According to Dr. Rice and her colleagues, the new policy will “broaden” the international consensus on Iran’s nuclear threat now that it faces the UN Security Council for censure and sanction, to address the full scope of its “threatening aggressive policies,” including support for terrorism and violent extremism, and the “democracy deficit in Iran.” To that end, the US intends to further engage its regional allies, including the Persian Gulf Arab states, G-8 partners, and NATO in a dialogue on the need to form a common front against the “threat” from the radical Islamic regime in Tehran.

To complement the international isolation of Iran, the Bush Administration will put into action a funding package and actively “support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom.” The State Department is asking Congress to increase funds from the existing \$10 million to \$85 million for 2006 and possibly 2007. To circumvent the existing US sanctions that prevent disbursement of such funds to Iranian entities, licenses will be secured from the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the Treasury Department.

The fund will be used to “empower civil society” and “promote democracy” in Iran, increase satellite TV and Radio broadcasting to the country, expand outreach to young and professional Iranians, and enhance communication for public diplomacy. The recipients will include Iranian human rights activists, labor union leaders, political dissidents, students, academics, and NGOs



inside and outside Iran. The identity of individuals receiving the money will not be made public for fear of retribution from the Islamic Government.

The recipients are to use the fund to build support networks, expand internet access, shore up civic education, and foster political participation. As one official said, the Administration hopes to use the fund to “deepen” ties with the Iranian people and initiate a political movement in Iran akin to the Polish “solidarity model.” In response to a reporter for the BBC Persian Service, who said the funding will lead to more crackdowns on domestic opposition, the official said that the dissidents and experts he has consulted all tell him that “exactly the opposite” is the case.

Many in the US Administration and Congress, as well academics, policy experts and Iranian dissident individuals and groups, have been touting the idea of “regime change” for sometime. “This is a very good idea,” said Professor Michael McFaul of Stanford University (as quoted in *The New York Times*). A few of his Iranian-American and American colleagues at the Hoover Institution also advocate regime change. Those behind the policy believe that the simultaneous internal destabilization and international isolation will lead to a total collapse of the regime or to a change in its policies.

While the new policy suggests that the Administration is preparing to embrace regime change as the desired option, one of the officials briefing the media suggested that regime reform remains an option. In response to a question on whether this was a definite regime change policy, one official said, we still “wish to see the policies of the Iranian Government change.” This same view was expressed by another official on the occasion of the announcement of the new Office of Iran Affairs. CNN.com quoted the official as saying that the office has been created to “facilitate change in Iranian policies.”

Washington is wisely leaving room for regime reform as it duels Tehran over the nuclear matter because regime change option has no real chance. The Iranian people, the neighboring Muslim states, and the US allies will not support it. Smart sanctions, even if they target the regime’s leaders, will fail; the Islamic Republic is a millipede with no real head as Saddam Hussein was in Iraq. There is no likelihood for an internal military coup as “the junta” is already in power. Surgical strikes or military invasion will destroy Iran but cannot conquer Tehran. Lastly, the opposition, including separatist ethnic groups, is too weak to overthrow the regime even with full US support.

Citing the failed experience of the reform movement under the leadership of former President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), the regime change advocates argue that the regime reform option will not work because of the constraints that the Islamic Constitution places on meaningful change in the system. Yet, that very experience indicates that even before the reform movement had hit a Constitutional wall, it had taken the wrong road. The first time I met Mr. Khatami in New York City in 1998, I told him in a private meeting that his movement will fail



unless he made normalization of relations with the US his top priority. I know he tried but could not deliver.

That was the movement's first fatal problem. Not making free elections another top priority and initiating a struggle toward that end was the second fatal problem. Instead, the reformists took a Hercules approach and tried to advance their cause monopolistically. If they had organized and mobilized the public for normalization and free elections, their chance for success would have significantly increased. The reformists focused narrowly on political reform, a strategy that only a small middle class supported. Finally, the movement took an ideological approach to reform, missing the fact that Iran needed a pragmatic orientation. The end result was that the reform became disconnected from the people who wished to improve their economic circumstances.

From Faulty Assumptions to Flawed Analysis

The two assumptions justifying the policy shift in favor of regime change or reform are that Iran cannot be stopped from building nuclear bombs, and that a secular, democratic, nuclear Iran is less threatening than a radical, Islamic, nuclear Iran. The key individuals advancing these arguments are affiliated with the Defense Department and Vice President Dick Cheney's office. As the *New York Times* reported on February 16, they are "resigned to a nuclear-armed Iran and argue that the best way to address that problem is by opening Iran to democracy and reform."

However, both these assumptions are erroneous. The existing intelligence reports, including those from the US, give Iran no less than eight years before it can build a nuclear device. As is, Iran has serious technical, legal, and political problems in maintaining even its non-industrial enrichment program. For example, Iran lacks the required technologies in the fields of chemistry, physics and engineering to produce pure UF₆. The expected international isolation will make it hard for Iran to obtain the technologies and parts it needed to produce nuclear fuel.

Besides, US experience with existing nuclear states does not support the proposition that, unless it is democratic, a nuclear Iran is a more dangerous state. The former USSR, Russia, China and Pakistan are examples of secular, communist and Islamic, dictatorial nuclear states that never used their bombs. Incidentally, the only state that has ever used nuclear bombs is the most democratic state existing (trite). A democratic nuclear Iran is not any safer than a dictatorial nuclear Iran; nor is a dictatorial nuclear Iran more dangerous.

The emerging regime change or reform policy is also justified by the "war on terror," which has increasingly focused on a broad concept of radical Islam. President George W. Bush has designated "radical Islam" as America's number one enemy, analogous to communism during the Cold War. With nuclear bombs, radical Islam becomes even a larger menace, the argument goes. This danger used to be represented by the "homeless" Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden; now it is represented by Iran and its current president, Mr. Ahmadinejad as well.



The rational observer will see a sea of difference between a homeless radical Islamic group and a historic nation where radical Islam controls the executive branch for the moment. By the time Iran is expected to build a nuclear bomb, it will have experienced three presidential elections. Even the most ardent enemies of Tehran acknowledge that the Iranian nation is moving away from radical Islam, and that the last presidential election is better understood as an aberration rather than a normal occurrence. After all, that election was not about bombs but about butter!

Iran has been a dictatorship for centuries, including the last two hundred years when it has not initiated any regional conflict. The only state toward which Iran remains hostile in its region is Israel but, as history indicates, much of the anger Iran directs toward Israel is rhetorical, responsive to Israeli rhetoric or for domestic consumption. Incidentally, a nuclear Iran would be even more constrained if authoritarian. The fear of regime collapse and the consequent danger of nuclear materials falling into terrorist hands are overblown.

Nevertheless, given the situation in Iraq and the volatile situation in the energy region of the Persian Gulf, Washington is justified to remain vigilant about the Islamic regime's behavior and to help open up Iran to democracy and human rights. However, to be acceptable, any American action must be made within the international laws and the UN Charter, which disallows intervention in internal affairs of member states. Washington must also account for the fact that the Iranians are a proud and nationalistic nation (trite) and that they will resist challenges to their sovereignty.

The Bush Administration's call for "democracy and reform" in Iran is a welcome development, as it corrects a major deficiency in past American Iran policies, namely, the lack of vision about the kind of Iran Washington had wanted to emerge. However, the larger and more important question of how to bring about democratic change in Iran is not yet well articulated. Specifically, the new pro-democracy policy makes erroneous assumptions and as such its implementation can prove disastrous for Iran and US-Iran relations.

The new policy assumes that Iran can be effectively isolated, the Islamic regime has a shallow support base, reform in Iran is hindered by a lack of money and information; democracy is the first priority for most Iranians, and Iran can become democratic without relations with the US. The new policy is also based on a Cold-War model of political change that took place in Eastern Europe. It is further assumed that by simply distinguishing between the Iranian people and its regime, the disgruntled population will rise up in support of the US initiatives. Finally, it is assumed that the regime will respond to force better than to diplomacy.

Fifteen countries border Iran. It has long-standing cultural and economic ties with many of these neighbors. Iran also sits on world energy reserves, having 9 percent of the world's oil reserves and 15 percent of gas reserves. Iran's geopolitical position combined with its large population, rich cultural heritage, and long history makes it a pivotal state in that neighborhood. These and other advantages make isolating Iran counterproductive and difficult. Indeed, the current nuclear



crisis is a product of the past US attempts to isolate Iran. To avoid the US sanctions, Tehran turned to undercover markets to build its nuclear facilities.

Because the new policy is obsessed with President Ahmadinejad's radicalism and is designed to oust him, it focuses on his shallow support base while ignoring the will and the military-security background of his supporters. The policy differences between Mr. Ahmadinejad and his rivals within the Islamic regime are also mistakenly elevated to an imaginary factional antagonism. This wrong impression is being promoted by certain disgruntled reformists and pragmatists. A policy that threatens the system as a whole cannot hope to receive practical support from the rival Islamic factions against the regime's elected president.

The new policy is also dismissive of the broader support base for the Islamic regime. Even though almost every key pro-democracy personality and group called for the boycott of the presidential elections last June, and President Bush endorsed the idea, and the candidates were hand-picked by the Guardian Council, still 60 percent of the voting population went to the polls. Of the remaining 40 percent, 20 percent has never voted. By refusing to participate, the boycotters did not help themselves rather Mr. Ahmadinejad, who moved to the second round with only 14 percent of the votes cast.

An absolute majority of Iranians are money-deprived. These include the pro-democracy and human rights activists opposed to the regime. However, no amount of money can help them become viable alternatives in the foreseeable future. During the last presidential election, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani spent upward of fifty million US dollars to end up with an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the relatively unknown Dr. Ahmadinejad. The problem with pro-democracy forces is their inability to appreciate the true craving of the majority of the Iranian people and connect to the wider society.

Information is a key for successful political campaigns. Unlike the former USSR and its satellites in Eastern Europe, Iran is hardly an information-deprived society. Despite the restrictive actions of the regime, hundreds of radio and television stations beam programs into Iran, thousands of e-mail groups, web logs and websites are active, and hundreds of national and local newspapers and magazines are published throughout the country. They include VOA, Radio Farad, BBC, RFI, DW, and the anti-regime satellite TVs in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and places outside the US.

Contrary to what the new policy makers think, the problem with information that the Iranians receive is not its quantity but its purpose and quality. Skeptical of the governmental broadcasts, many Iranians turned to the sources outside the country for news and analysis. However, they became increasingly disappointed with what they saw and heard, particularly from the US-based Iranian satellite TVs, which propagate an obsolete political culture. The Iranian people are looking for independent educational media that modernizes their political culture and deepen their understanding of issues and alternatives.



Iranian society is highly stratified. An absolute majority lives in poverty and is struggling to meet basic needs, including food, job, housing, education, and health services. They were critical in the surprise election of Dr. Ahmadinejad who campaigned on a platform of social justice and anti-corruption. Only a small number of them must have voted for Dr. Mostafa Moin, the pro-democracy candidate who took fourth place in the first round of the elections. This social group cannot be mobilized by a democracy campaign that remains ignorant of their immediate and basic needs.

The upper class, a tiny but powerful segment of the population, is divided into two main factions. Most among the merchant faction support the Islamic regime and maintain a good working relationship with the Government. In cohort with corrupt members of the ruling elite, they have benefited from the American sanctions. In contrast, the more modern and industrial faction has suffered the from US containment policy. They will not support the US pro-democracy approach unless it provides for Iran's economic integration into global capitalism and for their required social peace and political stability.

That leaves the critical middle class as the best hope for democracy. However, there are serious problems with this social group. They are divided into many factions, some overlapping, including reformists, leftists, rightists, modernists, traditionalists, secularists, fundamentalists, nativists, nationalists, and royalist. They are also distinguished by their relations to the regime or their desired political system, which range from Islamic to republican to royal. No wonder that they do not currently co-exist politically; sadly, the prospect for their possible union in the future also remains bleak.

While many among the middle class are habitual defenders of liberal democracy, their practical commitment to the causes of free market, reform, and human rights is questionable. Worse, they have grown more and more indifferent to social justice, the cornerstone of Iranian politics since the 19th century. Indeed, members of the middle class, who have a lot of ideas, lack a unifying ideology. They also suffer from a serious lack of leadership as personal rivalry prevails among their rank and file.

Complicating the American pro-democracy effort on behalf of the Iranian middle class are three other critical factors. First, a majority of the “governmental reformists” will remain in the shadow of the conservatives in power in the face of a suspicious US effort; second, many members of the secular middle class are habitually radical and their commitment to the US is opportunistic at best; and third, in power, the middle class has been inept in matters of economic growth and management, the provision of basic needs, and national security. This last factor has led to a public crisis of confidence.

As the foregoing analysis of the various classes shows, there is no such a thing as “the Iranian people” to rise in support of the US in its struggle against the Islamic regime, even if most



Iranians are opposed to the system. Iranians are highly stratified and divided. A small group will even support a US invasion of Iran, but an absolute majority will not even support the US “pro-democracy” policy, because it does not satisfy their socio-economic needs, and because Iranians are habitually opposed to foreign intervention. Then there is the cultural resistance that the threatened Islamic religion will generate.

The Iranian people also have problem trusting the Administration’s pro-people words while its deeds have been humiliating and damaging to them. Take the Administration’s economic sanctions, particularly its refusal to sell civilian plane spare parts to Iran. That policy has caused poverty and the loss of many Iranian lives. Or take the humiliating finger printing and body searching of Iranians at the American visa checkpoints. Iranians are suspected as terrorists more than any nationalities even though not a single Iranian has been directly implicated in any terrorist act against the Americans.

If the Bush Administration wishes to be supported by the Iranian people as it targets the regime, it must take concrete steps in their favor. Lifting sanctions on sale of spare parts and civilian planes, and removing finger-printing and body-searching regulations would help. Even more effective would be the expansion of the American Interest Section in the Swiss Embassy in Tehran with the authority to issue certain visas. The US has never seriously considered this option, and if it were to put a request to the Iranian Government for the purpose, Tehran would have serious difficulty to refuse. The Iranian people support such expansion and Iran has a huge Interest Section in the US.

The view that the Islamic regime responds to force more than to diplomacy is based on the behavior of the regime vis-à-vis the war with Iraq and the American hostages in Tehran. In both cases, the regime did not respond to diplomacy until forced. However, this analysis misses a fundamental change in the fabric of the regime. There was a time when members of the clergy were in full control, and they knew the limits of their power. Today, many non-clergy radical Muslims are in charge and they largely come from humble and security-military backgrounds. They often do not respond to force because they do not understand the limits of their power and cherish martyrdom.

Yet, the most formidable obstacle democratic change faces in Iran is the lack of a normal US-Iran relation. Experience in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe indicate that no dictatorship has ever made the transition to democracy in the absence of diplomatic ties with the US. No diplomatic tie with the US means no democratic transition. Period! Because there are also countries like Egypt whose relations with the US have not led to democratic change, we can only conclude that diplomatic ties with the US are a necessary condition for transition to democracy, but not a sufficient condition.

Iran will not be an exception to this rule even if it has plenty of pro-democracy forces. This fact is already witnessed by the Iranian experience in the last 26 years. In the absence of diplomatic



tie with the US, Iran will become a Cuba, a North Korea, or an Iraq for the US, or else it will experience another violent revolution over which no one will have any effective control. Given the political, social, and ethnic make up of the country, and in the absence of a charismatic and unifying leader, the next Iranian revolution could lead to civil war and regional disintegration. No person, group or country can hope to benefit from such an eventuality.

Modeling Iranian Democratic Transformation

Democratic change rarely happens in the absence of relations with the US because democracy requires a peaceful and secure environment as well as time to mature. In countries that have severed diplomatic ties with the US, a military-security environment develops. Under this condition, the public views reformers as weak while the state suppresses them as saboteurs or the “American fifth column.” The condition is then prepared for the anti-democratic forces to take control of the state power. The Iranian political environment is no different.

The prolonged lack of diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran has created a military-security environment in Iran that nurtures radicalism and dictatorship. Meanwhile, the past short-sighted US sanctions policies, as well as the hostility between the two countries since the revolution, have made the US an outside existential threat, further eroding its ability to mediate peaceful democratic change in Iran. More significantly, the separation between the two nations has deprived the US of the opportunity to better understand Iran and build trust with the Iranian people, its political groups, and the regime.

For Iran to become democratic, this environment must be changed, a transformation that will require diplomatic ties with the US. The fact that the democratic change in South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, Brazil, and Chile, and the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine all took place in countries that had, and have, diplomatic ties with the US is often overlooked. Also often overlooked is the fact that in Cuba and North Korea, where the US does not maintain diplomatic ties with the regimes, dictators have stalled democratic changes, and they remain in place.

The physical presence allowed the US to get a better feel for the hopes of the people, political cultures, and dissident groups. It helped it build trust and stay in contact with contending political forces. US diplomatic missions and NGOs were better positioned to assess emergent situations, apply pressure, and offer support. The American public diplomacy had a real flavor to it. Significantly, the physical presence helped the US be seen as a mediator of change rather than a threatening outside force. The 13,000 miles that separate the US from Iran deprives Washington of these opportunities.

People often bring up Egypt and Saudi Arabia, among other authoritarian states, as counter examples that have maintained diplomatic ties with the US but have not made the transition to democracy. The critics must be reminded of the fact that almost all such nations are Islamic, oil



producing, or both. While diplomatic ties satisfy the necessary condition for their transition to democracy, their specific situation does not allow for the development of the sufficient conditions that are required for the purpose. In the Iranian case, these will include the reformation of Islam, diversification of oil economies, and expansion of a more democratic political culture.

The countries that were successful in making the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the presence of diplomatic ties with the US indicate that transformation, broadly speaking, has taken two roads. In some, like Eastern Europe, the democratic change was brought about by a “revolution” that changed the nature of the existing system, e.g., from socialism to capitalism. In others, the transition meant a constitutional change and “negotiated” or electoral transfer of political power to democratic forces without systemic change, as in South Korea, Chile and South Africa, where political changes sustained capitalist development.

In the absence of diplomatic ties with the US, neither of the two models would apply to Iran. However, if they were to re-establish relations, the less-revolutionary approach would suit Iran better. Admittedly, Islam and oil factors make the Iranian transition more difficult as they are often used to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the system in Iran is capitalist and its reformation would not require systemic change. What would be required is a reformed constitution and political culture that would allow for a recurring democratic circulation of power among the competing political forces.

There are other reasons why the “revolution” model is not suitable for Iran. In Eastern Europe, the one-party communist systems were autocratic and subservient to the former USSR; the regimes were totally discredited and illegitimate; the opposition forces were avowedly pro-US; and the population was information-deprived. In contrast, the authoritarian Iranian regime allows for dissent, enjoys a degree of popularity, and is fairly independent of outside influences. The Iranian opposition views the US not as a friend but as an instrument to be used against the Islamic regime; and the public is moderately informed.

Religion has played prominent role in Iran and Eastern Europe -- mosques in the former and churches in the latter. However, the similarity ends here. In the Socialist Europe, the Christian churches played important role in resisting the Godless regimes and providing protection for the secular opposition without making any claim on political power. In contrast, Islam is the ideology of the theocratic state and of those who wish to reform it. The Islamic forces, while divided into reformers, fundamentalists and pragmatists, act in unison against threats to the regime, and they do not tolerate competition from the secular forces.

Making the New Iran Policy Work

The new Iran policy could help with democratic change in Iran if the Administration could overcome the two fundamental concerns that prevent it from making meaningful gesture toward



Iran. The first is the misperception that, given the overall environment of US-Iran relations, engaging Iran would look incongruous, unwise, or impossible. Yet, the US held talks with Vietnam while they fought a bloody war. The second is the misperception that Mr. Ahmadinejad or the regime would be the beneficiary of any concessions that the US might want to make toward Iran. Yet, any US-Iran deal would directly benefit the pro-democracy forces while delegitimizing the forces who claim the Islamic revolution was about resisting the US and Israel.

For the new policy to promote regime reform, the Administration needs to reassess its assumptions and analyses, and chart a different implementation strategy. The US knows how to contain Iran. It now needs to learn how to engage Iran as it applies its new transformational diplomacy to the Islamic system. The new Iran policy, said Richard Haas to CNN.com “looks to me like a hope rather than a strategy.” Haas, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, is a former Director of the Office of Policy Planning at the Department of State in the first Bush Administration.

The US can begin by making diplomatic ties at a lower level an immediate goal of the new policy. The Administration must also show interest in facilitating Iran’s integration into world economy, which requires a gradual lifting of key sanctions. The experience with Iran’s nuclear debacle demonstrates that sanctions are counterproductive. The first practical step will be for the US to consider a comprehensive dialogue with Iran. Outsourcing negotiations with Iran to Europeans and Russians is counterproductive in the long term. It is also unacceptable to those who want the Administration to “exhaust” all options before opting for regime change or use of force.

A window of opportunity exists now that Iran has agreed to the Administration’s request for negotiation over the problems in Iraq, and has offered to negotiate its nuclear programs with the US. While the talks on Iraq are bilateral, a possible dialogue on the nuclear matter must begin within a multilateral framework, similar to the 6+1 framework I have proposed,ⁱⁱⁱ and then gradually move toward a bilateral framework. The Iraqi platform also has the potential for expansion into other areas of dispute. Building on common grounds while key differences are negotiated will help bridge the confidence gulf as well as overcome emotions and threat perceptions.

For the US-Iran dialogue to succeed, Israel must become convinced that the outcome will serve its best interest as well. Tehran rightly accuses Israel of placing obstacles on the road to normalization of US-Iran relations. However, the Islamic Republic must assume the largest share of the responsibility for this Israeli stringency. The fact is the Islamic regime has ferociously propagated an anti-Israeli hysteria, making Israeli citizens fearful of Iran as an existential threat. Even if this fear was not fully justified, perception is reality in international relations. Iran is has done very little to mitigate the fear.



Equally unhelpful has been the Israeli opposition to a US-Iran dialogue, support for American sanctions, and threats to use force against Iran's nuclear targets. The one gain the Israelis have made from such stands is increased anti-Israeli feelings among the Iranians. It has also led to the growing power of Islamic radicals who now control the executive branch. Israelis must realize that the current anti-Israeli wave is also the final wave, but that this group intends to use Israel as a scapegoat to consolidate power. It is no wonder that Dr. Ahmadinejad should want to "wipe off Israel from the map" or declare the Holocaust a "myth."

There is only one way the Israelis can change the Iranian political environment in their favor: to encourage and support a US-Iran comprehensive dialogue. The fact is a normalization of US-Iran relations will inevitably lead to a normalization of Iran-Israeli conflict, transforming the relation to one akin to, say, Israeli-Saudi Arabia difficulties. As Thomas Pickering, who served as the American Ambassador to Israel (1985-1988), told me in an interview: "When I talked about the issue [of US-Iran relations] with people like Yitzhak Rabin, he would always tell me that the United States has to find a way to develop closer relationships with Iran."^{iv}

Diplomacy must succeed if a US-Iran confrontation is to be avoided over the nuclear matter. However, unless Tehran is convinced that the US is not an existential threat, diplomacy will not succeed, and an American presence in Iran will be impossible. Moving from regime change toward regime reform would help reduce Tehran's threat perception, making it amenable to nuclear concessions. Removing restrictions on the American NGOs to establish offices in Iran, and lifting sanctions on certain trades and investments would help with confidence-building. As experience has shown, trade melts dictators, while sanctions fatten them.

The two Governments must also encourage Track II diplomacy by NGO activists, academics, community leaders, and business executives as a complement to the state-to-state negotiations. Political dissidents and human rights activists and organizations who denounce violence, revolution and regime change must be encouraged to participate in such informal dialogues. What is more, the pro-normalization forces must be engaged, and they need as much boosting as pro-democracy forces. They are found inside and outside the regime, and in the country and beyond. Most Iranians are for a resumption of diplomatic ties with the US.

Iranian-Americans must also be utilized as a natural bridge that they are between the two countries. Thus far the Administration has not used this potential rightly; nor has the community offered to help in a constructive manner. The responsibility for this state of affairs rests squarely on the community. An absolute majority has remained indifferent to the US-Iran tensions while a few have even promoted confrontations as a means toward their goal to overthrow the Islamic regime or take revenge from a revolution that toppled them. Sadly, these groups included prominent pro-democracy and human rights activists.

What is more, many in the politically active part of the community made every effort to discredit a minority that tried to improve understanding and dialogue between the two nations. They



argued that a re-establishment of diplomatic ties between the US and Iran will benefit the regime and hurt efforts toward democracy and human rights in Iran! The experience has proven them wrong and they will be proven wrong in the future as well. The good news is that many now realize the problem and are expressing serious concerns about a possible US-Iran war. A few are even promoting a misconceived anti-war movement.

To make use of this community in a better way, the Administration must make an attempt to better understand its fears and motivations. A great number of Iranian-Americans dislike the Islamic regime, but they would also hate to see Iran become another Iraq or Cuba for the US. Except for a small minority, they do not support military strikes against Iran and are against destabilization of the country. They also dislike another revolution in Iran, particularly when an attractive leadership does not exist, and because they have no hope that a “solidarity model” of regime change can be peacefully implemented. The majority supports normalization of relations.

The best thing the new Iran policy can do is to help make elections in Iran free and fair. The US can legitimately put pressure on the regime for this universal demand, and it will have the unconditional support of the Iranian people, international organizations like the UN, human rights organizations, and democracies throughout the world. However, because the Iranian electorate is divided, the call for free elections must also include a call for political coalition. This can in turn help alleviate the fear of political revenge and facilitate elite circulation. Those who loose power in Iran often also loose life and property.

A sizeable portion of any American funding for empowering Iranian civil society and promoting Iranian democracy must be channeled through American academic institutions for educational purposes focused on promoting a new political culture in the country. The criteria in all cases must include full transparency and accountability. As is, the proposed funding gives the Islamic Republic a reason to label Iranian students and academics in the US, as well as the political opposition and the NGOs, as spies of the US. Covert funding can only worsen the situation for them and others who would not even be among the recipients.

Covert funding would also be justifiably considered an intervention in Iran’s internal affairs, bringing back the memory of the CIA-assisted British coup of 1953 against the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, the late Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh. To effectively use resources without such misunderstandings, no funds should go to individuals and institutions that oppose normalization of relations between the two nations or are bent to destroy the regime in Tehran by violent means. Financing such individuals and organizations puts the regime-reform project in jeopardy and is not welcomed by the Iranian people.

Finally, the US must handle Iran with care as it confronts its ideological and strategic challenges. A “hard edged policy” that destabilizes Iran may not serve the American interest in a volatile and strategic Middle East. It is not in Iran’s interest to remain autocratic and inimical to the US. Tehran must accept reforming the theocracy and respond to American’s strategic concerns. The



US must help facilitate Iran’s democratic development and international integration. The two nations must become strategic and equal partners on the basis of their common interests. The alternative is a costly confrontation and the emergence of national fascism in Iran.

ⁱ Official Statements of the US State Department: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/61313.htm>;
<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/61505.htm>
<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/61384.htm>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/articles/Collective%20Framework-01-26-06.pdf>
<http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/articles/IranandAmericanTrappingDiplomacy11-17-05.pdf>; <http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/articles/WarandOurResponsibility11-04-05.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/articles/Collective%20Framework-01-26-06.pdf>

^{iv} <http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/aicinight/insightsept04.pdf>

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