

# How Washington Can Really Help the Greens in Tehran

Contributed by ALIREZA NADER, TRITA PARSI, Foreign Policy Magazine  
Friday, 12 February 2010

For the Obama administration, there are dangers in doing too much and too little to help the pro-democracy movement in Iran. Here is how to chart a safe, effective third way.

Ever since last June's disputed presidential election, Iran has been in the throes of change, with the nascent "green movement" protesting against an ever-more-authoritarian state. For months, Washington has asked itself: Should the United States actively push for regime change? Torn between the fear of ending up on the wrong side of history by being too cautious and the fear of ending up undermining the pro-democracy movement by being too aggressive, Barack Obama's administration is playing a difficult balancing act.

History shows that intervention is easier said than done. Past U.S. attempts to sway Iranian internal affairs -- such as the CIA-fomented 1953 coup d'état against a democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh -- have proven costly for U.S. interests. Most notably, Washington's support for the shah fueled the 1979 Islamic Revolution, inspiring anti-Western movements in Pakistan, Egypt, and beyond.

To make matters worse, due to its absence from the scene during the last 30 years, the United States is not sufficiently equipped to understand and shape what appears to be a titanic struggle between Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his opponents.

But between the extremes of doing nothing and doing everything, there is a middle ground: providing the Iranian pro-democracy movement with breathing space, rather than engaging in risky and imprecise exercises that would directly involve America as an actor on the Iranian scene. The United States can achieve this through a few simple steps.

First, the United States should tread carefully when it comes to issuing military threats. Under the shadow of a foreign military threat, the uphill battle of the Iranian pro-democracy movement becomes even steeper, as the Iranian regime is quite adept at exploiting foreign threats to stifle criticism at home. Moreover, the possibility of military conflict between Iran and the United States, or their respective "proxies," might allow the Iranian regime to distract the population from the internal crisis.

Second, the United States should avoid sanctions that put a burden on the Iranian people, rather than the Iranian government. Broad-based sanctions that hit the entire economy hurt common citizens far more than the powerful elites. Any new sanctions should demonstrate not only international discontent with the conduct of the Tehran government, but also an effort by the United States to keep from harming average Iranians.

The shift toward targeted sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) -- a 100,000-strong paramilitary and security force with significant business interests -- is a welcome development. However, because the IRGC controls Iran's official and underground economy, identifying sanctions that hurt only the IRGC while sparing the general population is difficult. Instead, U.S. and U.N. designation of specific individuals within the government and the IRGC responsible for the repression and human rights violations would make the sanctions both effective and truly targeted. Such designations would discourage foreign governments and companies from engaging with these individuals or conducting business with them and their affiliates, demonstrating to the regime that its domestic and foreign policies will have significant consequences.

Third, Washington should slow down the diplomatic process. Negotiation with Iran in and of itself is not the problem; engagement doesn't legitimize the Iranian government, as only the people of Iran can do that. But in spite of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's latest offer to accept the International Atomic Energy Agency nuclear deal, Iran remains in political turmoil. It is questionable that Tehran can make enduring decisions on issues of this magnitude under these circumstances. Adopting unrealistic time frames for diplomacy is self-defeating, as time is needed to ascertain Tehran's ability to come to an agreement as the Iranian political crisis unfolds. Avoiding an unhelpful and unnecessary rush toward an agreement also helps defuse demoralizing fears among the greens that their struggle for democracy is of no relevance to the United States.

Fourth, the international community, including the White House and U.S. State Department, should be vocal in excoriating Iran's human rights abuses. Condemning abuses should not be confused with interfering in internal Iranian affairs. As a signatory of numerous international conventions, Iran has a legal obligation to uphold its people's human rights. When it fails to do so, the United States and the world community has a responsibility to speak up. The Iranian government is, perhaps surprisingly, very sensitive in this area, due to its ambition to be perceived as a regional leader. This sensitivity should be utilized to make advances on the human rights front in Iran.

This would be helpful to the green movement in two ways. First, international focus on Iran's human rights record makes it more difficult for Tehran to proceed with its abuses. For instance, the United States should support a special session on the human rights situation in Iran at the U.N. Human Rights Council. Second, it helps counter the Iranian government's perception that the United States is willing to sacrifice the human rights and pro-democracy aspirations of the Iranian people for the sake of a nuclear deal.

Finally, Washington should exercise patience and view Iran as a long-term factor in shaping U.S. national security interests across the Middle East. The green movement will not and cannot adjust its action plan to suit the U.S. political timetable. But if patience is granted --- which includes avoiding a singular focus on the nuclear issue at the expense of all other considerations -- Washington will access a far greater potential for change.

Ultimately, the Iranian opposition has shown tremendous strength and vitality without any material support from the United States. Iran's people, not outsiders, will be the ones to achieve sustainable democracy. The Iranian opposition is not merely concerned about the June election, nor is it a simple creature of Iran's factional politics. Rather, it represents a historic struggle for democracy and human rights. Between the all or nothing approaches, the United States can best help by providing Iran's democrats with breathing room.

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Thoughts on Iran's Green Movement  
Sarah Lynch, February 12, 2010

On the 31st anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution Thursday, one street vendor in the Dahiyeh neighborhood of Mouawad wasn't hesitant to speak about Iran.

"I have Iranian friends here who say [screw] the people, [screw] the Iranian government," the 43-year-old said. "They don't like it."

The vendor -- who, like everyone interviewed for this piece, refused to have his name printed -- also wasn't hesitant to speak about oppression. "Maybe if they were in Iran, they wouldn't say that. But here in Lebanon, they are very free."

If the vendor's friends were in Iran, and they were willing to voice their beliefs, they would likely be part of the Green Movement -- the pro-democracy opposition that first hit the streets in protest against the Tehran government following the disputed presidential elections in June last year. NOW went to the largely Shia, Hezbollah-controlled Dahiyeh to hear what people think about the ongoing anti-government protests in Iran.

"It is part of the big picture of the war against Iran from the West," said a pizza maker, 40, in the neighborhood of Haret Hreik.

His customer, a journalist for one of the opposition's news websites, added that in Dahiyeh, it would be difficult to find someone who supports the protests. "It is known that 95 percent of the people in this area don't support the Green Movement," he said.

"The opposition is not one party, one opinion," he said. "Part of them are doing it for personal advantages. One of the reasons is they were shocked by the election, and another is they are not happy with how the regime is going in regard to financial matters and exterior politics, meaning how the regime is reacting to the outside world. The rest of the opposition are people who are exploiting this opposition to turn the regime upside down. Those are the people who are behind the fights."

The conversation piqued the interest of a young woman passing by the pizza shop. "I think people have the right to oppose the government because the government should be there to help people," the woman, a student of Biomedical Engineering at the Lebanese American University, said. But she was more interested in speaking about Iran's nuclear power.

"I just know that everyone hates Iran because they are interested in building nuclear weapons," she said. "But I think they have the right to because every state wants to be the best. The US has nuclear powers, so why not Iran? I wish Lebanon had nuclear weapons."

In the nearby neighborhood of Hay as-Sillum, a 25-year-old sat inside his cell phone shop. "The Iranian opposition is an American and Israeli project," he said. "An election happened and the opposition didn't win, so

why don't they accept the results? If the opposition won, would they accept that the people who support the regime protest? The votes weren't even near each other."

"They are ruining their own country," he added. "Even if they have a good reason they shouldn't do this. They should not use the West against their own country."

He also commented on the Iranian regime's treatment of the protestors, which has included imprisonment, tear gassing and even death. "The protestors were destroying cars and buildings so they deserve the way they were treated. Each country has a military and their job is to protect the country," he said.

A 54-year-old man down the street waiting for his car to be fixed had similar beliefs. "Like any other country that has a government, they would react the same way against people who are threatening the security of the country," he said. "They have shown that they burn tires and destroy things and that they are wrong in doing this."

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