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**America and the Iranian Political Reform Movement: First, Do No Harm**  
**House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**  
**Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman**

Americans are not very good at sitting still. Patience is not our strong suit and historically, it's not been a very prominent feature of our national character. The terms that describe us best most often reflect our restless impatience for progress; our natural inclination for pragmatism, and our deeply ingrained tendency to focus most of all on getting the job done.

In foreign affairs, however, the world offers few situations that lend themselves to neat, quick or simple solutions. It's not that Americans are incapable of patience. We can rise to the challenge when necessary, and especially when the alternatives offer little hope of success.

Following the Second World War, a forty year Cold War was not America's first choice for a foreign policy. But the alternatives to slow, grinding, vigilant containment of the Soviet Union, when honestly examined, led both Democratic and Republican administrations right back to containment. Some with more diplomacy, some with more pressure, but all with the same deadly serious goal of preventing the expansion of Soviet dominion, and all committed to the eventual collapse of the Communist system under the weight of its own failure and fallacies.

Iran, as I have stated in other hearings, is not the Soviet Union. By every measure of size, wealth, capability and influence, it is a vastly smaller though still dangerous challenge. And I would respectfully suggest that though the temptation is strong, reasoning in the Middle East by historical analogy in Europe is an invitation to disaster.

Nevertheless, the situation in Iran today does resonate powerfully with Americans, recalling memories of the late 1980s and the collapse of Communism. Again, a long policy of containment appears to be on the cusp of an unexpected but remarkable success, borne on the backs of oppressed people, struggling to be free from a vicious, brutal, ideological regime.

Moreover, there is a chance that this wholly indigenous movement, by virtue of its own success, and entirely for its own reasons, could bring about an incredibly positive shift in the global security environment.

I don't think any one believes the current leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran will go quietly or easily into retirement. And I think it would be foolish to assume that a reformed Iranian government would automatically be very friendly to the United States, or be less committed to the pursuit of its own national interests. But there is good reason to think that a different Iranian government, one that was truly answerable to the aspirations of the Iranian people, would transform the politics of the Middle East, dramatically change the global struggle against violent Islamic extremism and, potentially, salvage the global non-proliferation regime.

With stakes of this scale, American minds, my own included, begin to race ahead: How can we help? How can we support the Green Movement? How can we help accelerate the demise of this awful and irresponsible regime? And so on.

The most essential thing, I think, is to be patient—not passive and not indifferent—but instead of heeding the inner voice that yells, “Don't just stand there! Do something!” we need to turn this impulse on its head. Rather than just doing something, we need to stop and think things through.

Even if there was not a painful history of American intervention in Iranian affairs, and even if the Iranian regime was not desperate to smear its domestic opponents as American lackeys and spies, we should, at the very least, have some humility about the ability of our government to competently shape highly politicized and dynamic events in other nations. I would submit as proof the previous decade.

It seems to me that our first obligation is “to do no harm.” And our second obligation is to recognize that we are not a doctor, and Iran is not a patient. Iran is a sovereign state whose people are struggling bravely for their own freedom. It is natural and right for us to want to support their struggle. The question is how?

I would suggest that we start with a healthy amount skepticism about our ability to shape political developments in other countries, and a firm respect for the sovereignty and independence of Iran. With these caveats, I believe there are some important things that we can and should do; all of which can be done publicly and outside of Iran.

First, I think it essential that the President and the Secretary of State continue to regularly comment on the situation in Iran. I think the President's inclusion of Iran in his State of the Union address was very important. And I would want to highlight the very strong remarks made by Secretary Clinton following the regime's violence against protesters during the observance of Ashura in December of last year.

Second, I think the White House and the State Department in their daily briefings should draw attention to events in Iran as they occur, and make clear the views of the United States when there is violence or reports of severe violations of human rights.

Third, the United States, along with other nations that are actually committed to international human rights, should press within the United Nations the issue of Iran's repression of its own people; if possible in the Security Council, and at least within the Third Committee and in the Human Rights Council. Every nation should be given the chance to stand with the people of Iran.

Finally, I am convinced that the United States must continue to work with our international partners to apply sanctions to the government of Iran for its defiance of UN Security Council resolutions and for its violations of its IAEA safeguards agreement. Both the House and Senate have passed gasoline sanctions and I look forward to working with the Obama Administration to find a way forward on this legislation. Our goal must be to ensure the maximum impact on the Iranian government with the minimum harm to our diplomatic efforts and to the people of Iran who are struggling for their freedom. What I hold to be essential is that we must act, and that we must act in concert with others if at all possible. The Iranian regime is facing pressure from within unlike anything it's ever felt. To the extent that we can heighten that pressure by political and economic sanctions, I believe we are absolutely bound to do so.

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