

**Statement on *America and the Iranian Political Reform Movement: First, Do No Harm*  
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee  
on the Middle East and South Asia**

**Submitted By  
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking member Burton, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the timely opportunity to testify before you on what the United States could be and should be doing to support the Iranian opposition.

For most of its history the United States has sought to support freedom and opportunity abroad. This persistent insistence has been borne out of both principle and experience, knowing that free peoples, properly concerned with their own hopes and dreams, tend not to be enemies and, indeed, often become partners.

Today as we come together to apply this principle to Iran the subcommittee sounds a note of caution urging us to first do no harm. In my experience, however, working on the inside at the State Department, both as a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and then in the Bureau for Near East Affairs, this seemingly appropriate, balanced tone often becomes an excuse for hand-wringing and paralysis. Creativity and willingness to take a modicum of risk are suborned by the simple phrase uttered all too often, "We have to be sure that whatever we do does not put them at greater risk." Thus do diplomats convince themselves not to help Zimbabwean labor activists, Egyptian bloggers, and Chinese civil rights lawyers.

For this reason I tend to take my cue from the activists themselves, choosing to make available whatever assistance the United States has to offer and allowing those in the trenches fighting for their lives to decide whether and how to accept it. They surely know better than we the risks they are prepared to take for their freedom. The U.S. government's responsibility therefore should be to make a clear offer of support. In the case of Iran's Green Movement, so much more.

Iran's broad-based if loosely linked protest movement poses the first serious challenge to the Islamic Republic, shaking it to its core. This movement represents the latest iteration of a century-long effort to forge a constitutional republic based on pluralism and democracy. Since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, this drive has been thwarted first by monarchs and later by theocrats often aided and abetted by outside powers, including the United States.

The Islamic regime has demonstrated its resolve and determination to stay in power by unleashing waves of violence against its own people. Executions, especially against young people, are on the rise. And yet in the face of such violence, people in the streets are calling on the Obama administration and the American people to support them

Demonstrators in November chanted, “Obama, are you with us or are you with them?” We would be foolish to think they were asking this rhetorically. As several Iranian Americans have noted, the goal of protestors holding signs in English was not simply to show off linguistic ability.

Given our principles and their call for support, it is critical that the United States avail itself of this opportunity – and responsibility – to get it right. Too often when it comes to the people of Iran we have come down on the wrong side of history.

We got it wrong in 1953 when we joined with the British to overthrow the popularly elected Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddeq.

We got it wrong again in the period leading up to the Revolution in 1979. In the decade or so prior we ignored the warning signs and failed to press the Shah to liberalize politically as he liberalized economically. We ignored his excesses and human rights abuses and agreed to his demand that we not work with anyone in the opposition. In the process we failed to nurture currents in society that might have played a moderating role, possibly averting the political upheaval that followed. Ultimately we reaped the whirlwind of our policies: a broad-based democratic revolution took place which was then subverted by Islamist radicals who remain with us today.

Our unconditional support for dictatorship in Iran has created deep ambivalence among Iranians toward the United States. Since the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, Iranians have been involved in a struggle to give democratic voice to one of the great civilizations only to find themselves thwarted by visionless monarchs or power hungry theocrats. Washington consistently has come down on the wrong side. Today, on the eve of another anniversary of the Revolution and at a time when the theocrats are being challenged in unprecedented ways by their own people, we should get it right. As one Green Movement activist put it to me recently, “If the U.S. thought relations between the United States and Iran were strained after the Musaddeq coup, just wait until Washington betrays the Green Movement.”

So what *should* the United States do? It is time for the Obama administration to launch a nuanced, if comprehensive, offensive to challenge the regime on human rights grounds confident that it is following, not leading, the Iranian people who are risking their lives to create a new future in Iran. Should the Green Movement succeed, a fundamental reorientation of the regime may be possible with positive implications for the core American interest of avoiding a nuclear Iran.

My specific recommendations largely fall into three categories: public diplomatic statements and actions; re-engineered and re-emphasized programming; and punitive sanctions.

#### *A public diplomacy offensive*

Recently, the Obama administration has sought to leaven its outreach policy with references to human rights. Yet it has done so only half-heartedly, and only after

reassuring Tehran that it remains open to continued negotiations. This bifurcation of policy may once have produced results, but not in the post-June 12 context. At present, the regime is too nervous about its survival to catch the nuance or to care. It welcomes the continued open door, but rejects any interference into its domestic affairs even while it excoriates the U.S. for plotting its overthrow. Worse, the “we’re-with-you-but-open-to-negotiations-with-your-government” message is too easily misunderstood by the Iranian people, who are becoming increasingly resentful of American equivocation. In October, an Iranian cartoonist has depicted President Obama covering his eyes while shaking hands with Ahmadinejad who, in turn, tramples bloodied individuals.



Clearly, it is time to get the rhetoric right.

To begin with, future policy actions must be set squarely within the context of the Administration’s human rights concerns. If the United States imposes targeted or even more broad-based sanctions, it should link such action to the IRGC/Basij violations of human rights since June 12th, for instance. Sanctions taken at the UN would, of course, remain oriented toward stopping Iran’s nuclear program, but the way in which the United States explains them would change. This message should be conveyed first and foremost by the President, but also by key members of his administration, who should all be made routinely available to the BBC Persian Service and Radio Farda to explain U.S. policy.

Additionally, the United States should seek to expropriate the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic that has successfully portrayed itself as a victim of the U.S. for the past 31 years. After June 12<sup>th</sup>, the power of the government’s “Great Satan” rhetoric hollow to most Iranians. Playing on Iranian psychology, the Obama administration should now attempt to invert this relationship by portraying itself as the victim of regime dissimulation. The message is a simple one: “The deal that was proposed in Geneva would have given Iran everything it wanted. Clearly the U.S. was prepared to compromise its principles to achieve an agreement but we can only go so far. We cannot sacrifice our human rights principles to achieve a deal while the regime kills and tortures its own citizens.”

The administration should also make it known publicly that it is currently planning for the eventuality of a democratic government coming to power in Tehran by preparing the necessary legal groundwork to lift sanctions and remove Iran from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. It should articulate the benefits that would flow from such steps, while also making clear that the process will take time. This would have the twin benefits of making clear that the current regime is *not* democratic while helping to set expectations in the event the regime actually did collapse.

The administration should publicly re-launch a revitalized Iran Democracy Fund and/or bolster the National Endowment for Democracy's ability to support democrats inside Iran and elsewhere. As you know the administration has renamed the program the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) Fund and has de-funded a number of prominent grantees, including the Yale Human Rights Documentation Center. What's more concerning to me, however, are those groups who until their funds were cut off were providing a much needed lifeline to those inside Iran. For instance, I recently received a desperate email from a former grant recipient based in Europe who works to get news into and out of Iran. In the email he begged for more assistance as his organization sought to accommodate fleeing journalists from Iran to enlist them in the struggle. The State Department, he reported, was cutting their funding. Such actions send powerfully negative messages to those our rhetoric of solidarity is meant to reassure.

Along these lines, the White House should strongly consider having the President give a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy echoing President Reagan's original speech in Westminster in 1982 but this time focused on Iran and the democratic aspirations of its people.

Critical in the medium term is to do something dramatic to improve what should be America's preeminent vehicle for communicating with the Iranian people: the Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN). Poorly managed by people who do not know Iran or its politics, PNN's journalistic professionalism currently meets only minimal standards. Most of VOA's 200 employees lack any television experience beyond what they have gained at VOA, for example. Its lack of a proper editorial board makes for poor priority setting, robbing PNN of impact. To cite just one example, on the day after the death of Ayatollah Montazeri, when the BBC Persian Service was blanketing Iranian airwaves with coverage similar to that given in the U.S. to pop star Michael Jackson's passing last summer, PNN was airing documentaries on global warming. Indicative of its lack of impact is the fact that Khamenei rails against the BBC Persian Service, but rarely mentions VOA. The Obama administration should work urgently with the Broadcasting Board of Governors to appoint a director who knows broadcasting, speaks Farsi, knows both American and Iranian politics, and who can re-tool the organization to meet its Congressional mandate. This is not as hard as it sounds.

While the VOA is being fixed, mechanisms should be found to create a communications platform for the opposition so that it can get its message out. Similar, if sensitive,

programs exist to support independent terrestrial and satellite radio stations targeting Syria, for instance. Other examples abound in the past including U.S. support for Serbian opposition radio. This requires some risk-taking but would not require centralization and for the moment would be simply encouraging the State Department to continue on-going efforts rather than dropping them.

### *Seeing sanctions straight*

The administration should move forward expeditiously on targeted sanctions against IRGC leadership and companies but not in the typical incremental manner. Doing so only allows for regime elements to develop strategies to avoid the impact of the proposed measures, and robs the individual announcements of their strategic communications impact. Reportedly, the administration has used the past year of “engagement” to devote considerable time and effort to identify the economic underpinnings of the IRGC.<sup>1</sup> If true, the time to act is now. It should execute all prospective “targeted sanctions” at the same time as a single tidal wave to boost their intended effectiveness and strengthen their political impact inside Iran.

Targeted sanctions should be combined with the threat of a gasoline embargo—or even the embargo itself. The regime pretends not to care about gasoline sanctions, but adding this measure to the U.S. arsenal would increase pressure on regime hardliners, giving them something more to worry about and the opposition something additional to blame them for. It is true that since 2007 the regime has recognized its strategic vulnerability and has taken steps to reduce it. Nonetheless, the current political unrest and cold winter creates a propitious moment for the President to encourage passage in the Senate of the companion bill to the House’s already passed Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA), which would give him the power to initiate such a ban. But here too, any sanctions or threat of sanctions imposed should be initiated because of the regime’s human rights violations.

### *Stiffening Europe’s resolve*

As human rights abuses in Iran have mounted and Stalinesque show trials have continued, European populations have become increasingly outraged, putting pressure on their leaders to do something. This has created a shift in official opinion, rhetoric and, occasionally, policy. The Netherlands, for instance, recently joined the United States in listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization, and the European Commission is reportedly in the process of identifying possible sanctions against Iran.<sup>2</sup>

The Obama administration should create momentum for this shift in attitude by indicating its strong, public support for such initiatives. It should also encourage each European capital to echo its statements on human rights. Although Brussels may yet prove to be a weak reed, London, Paris and Berlin have never been as close to taking real action against Iran as they are now. Moreover, President Obama remains personally popular in

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hirsch and Michael Isikoff, “Obama’s Enforcer,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ilan Berman, “Toughen Up On Iran,” *Forbes.com* 11 Dec. 2009  
<<http://www.forbes.com/2009/12/11/iran-america-politics-washington-opinions-contributors-ilan-berman.html>>.

Europe, and could use this popularity to good effect by making a public plea on human rights grounds. Without American leadership, however, Europe is not likely to find the will to act. Given that Europe, rather than the U.S., holds the economic leverage vis-à-vis Iran, failing to do so would represent another enormous missed opportunity.

### **Shifting gears**

In the very near term, given the determination of hardliners to use force against the people, a democratic breakthrough in Iran remains unlikely. Yet the violence the regime is currently employing is radicalizing those in the streets, and making the Green Movement's putative leadership less inclined to compromise. Proof of this hardening of positions was evident in the recent manifesto issued by exiled intellectuals known to be close to the internal Green Movement leadership, which demands the immediate resignation of President Ahmadinejad as a precondition for talks.<sup>3</sup>

The regime, in other words, is vulnerable. As President Obama's dream of negotiating a nuclear deal fades, the prospects for confronting the regime by expressing solidarity with the aspirations of the Iranian people have increased. Doing so will reinforce the regime's paranoia and may yet tip the balance in favor of those committed to reshaping or even overthrowing it. A change in regime provides the best safeguard against a nuclear Iran and may even usher in a period of U.S.-Iranian partnership that could radically impact U.S. efforts to stabilize both Iraq and Afghanistan. Engagement as a policy has failed; it is now time to unequivocally challenge the regime on human rights.

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Wright, "Abdolkarim Soroush on the Goals of Iran's Green Movement," The Huffington Post 7 Jan 2010 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-wright/abdolkarim-soroush-on-the\\_b\\_414882.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-wright/abdolkarim-soroush-on-the_b_414882.html)>.