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America and the Iranian Political Reform Movement: First, Do No Harm

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The current democratic movement in Iran, which began after the rigged presidential election in June 2009, is a non-violent movement which aims to rely on itself without asking for foreign help. The people involved in this movement believe that democracy is not a gift that can be received by others, but rather an internal effort of a people to emancipate itself from tyranny and realize its dream of justice, freedom and national sovereignty. The Iranian people appreciate President Barak Obama's policy of not intervening in Iranian political affairs and allowing them to manage their way toward democracy. Therefore, any policy toward Iran should be chosen in a prudent and cautious way that would not affect the democratic movement in a negative manner.

My experience with political activists who are involved in the Green movement is that they do not expect any direct help from the United States or any other foreign power. But a close look at the Iranian situation reveals that in this specific historical moment the interest of the international community and the democratic interests of Iranians are in confluence. To be sure, the focus of the international community is on the Iranian nuclear program, while the main preoccupation of the Iranian people is securing basic political and human rights and integrating the country into the international community. However, peace in the region and democracy in Iran now seem to be inseparable, because the same forces that threaten the peace are the same powers in Iran who threaten democracy and run the repressive machinery against the Iranian people.

The threat to regional peace and Iranian democracy are the same: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is not only the main body in charge of the Iranian nuclear program, but also is the most effective means for political suppression in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's leader and commander-in-chief. The Islamic Republic is nothing but an economic-religious-military complex that applies its coercive power not through political institutions but through a military and security apparatus under the direct supervision of Ayatollah Khamenei. His religious authority is contested by the clerical establishment. The only power base he has is within the military and security community of the country. Khamenei has lost much of his political and religious legitimacy and without the military and especially the IRGC, he would have no real power.

Since coming to power, Ayatollah Khamenei has never given an interview to the media. He does not feel any sense of responsibility to the people, deriving his power from Iran's oil income. In practice, he is accountable before nobody, despite the constitutional provision for an Assembly of Experts to supervise his leadership, because he vets who can run for that Assembly. He directly controls dozens of foundations that own some of the wealthiest companies in Iran and is not accountable before the parliament or the government. And the IRGC – whose commanders he appoints –

and its affiliates control one third of Iran's national income, dominating construction, oil field services, and telecommunications, among other industries.

In order to stop Iran's suspicious nuclear activities, the international community needs to apply pressure on the IRGC, which not only threatens the region through a suspicious nuclear program, but is using the Quds force, asymmetrical warfare, and support for extremist groups to try to weaken Sunni allies of the West and sabotage the Arab-Israeli peace process and the budding democratic process in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Democracy and peace can be achieved through weakening the military government in Tehran and pressuring the IRGC. The two parallel tracks -- the international community's effort for peace and the Iranian people's democratic movement -- naturally reinforce each other, because they fight with the same enemy. Therefore, the main mechanism for supporting the democratic movement in Iran is to target the financial and military capabilities of the IRGC. A more powerful IRGC will result in a more militarized government, and a more militarized government is more likely to militarize the nuclear program for dangerous purposes. The real change in Iran is not a formal shift in the façade of the political structure. The change happens when civilians who think of Iran's national interest rather than ideological ambitions take power and push the fundamentalist military out of the economic and political spheres.

Another important step the West can take to help the democratic movement is to help Iranians connect with the outside world. Khamenei often expresses his belief that he is in a soft war with the West. For him, all new telecommunication, internet and satellite technology are western tools to defeat him in this war. All bloggers, human rights and female activists, artists and writers, journalists and students -- even clerics who criticize him -- are un-paid western soldiers in this war. Even the teaching of humanities is a part of the western soft-war arsenal, which is why he has suggested closing all university humanities departments. The Iranian regime annually spends billions of dollars to jam TV and radio transmissions, filter the internet, censor all Western-cultural products, listen in on phone conversation, and interrogate artists, writers and university professors who travel to the West for cultural festivals or conferences. Khamenei cannot govern in an Iran opened to the world. He prefers to govern a large prison-like Iran in which Iranians are disconnected from the world outside.

Putting cracks in the wall of this prison -- opening Iran to the world -- would be a great help to the democratic movement in Iran. The United States has made many efforts in this regard but still could do more. The major internet companies in the West could work with activists to find ways to bypass Iran's internet censors. Companies that provide Iran with the technology of surveillance and suppression should be named and shamed; consumers should shy away from these companies' products, and governments should urge these companies to reconsider their practices. Iran should not be able to use modern technology for fundamentalist and totalitarian purposes. It is outrageous that Iranian state television is allowed to transmit on the EUTELSAT Hotbird satellites (run by France) when Iranian jamming of Hotbird satellites has been so powerful that other customers demanded that EUTELSAT kick the BBC and VOA off the satellites -- which to its shame EUTELSAT did -- before later adding these services back. Iran's violation of its international commitments about not interfering with satellite transmissions should be vigorously pursued at the International Telecommunications Union. As a customer through its role with the VOA, the U.S. government should demand EUTELSAT throw Iranian state television off Hotbird, not VOA. New measures and mechanisms are needed to stop Iran from breaking international law.

Furthermore, because Iran's leaders are afraid of any contact between Iranians and the world outside, the international community, including European countries and the United States, should facilitate the visa process for ordinary Iranian citizens so that they can readily travel abroad. Direct contact between Iranians and the rest of the world is an important tool for dismantling the regime's propaganda against Western liberal democratic values, and is a major antidote to reactionary anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments.

And finally the U.S. should make a distinction between human rights issues and democracy. The Iranian people need the international community's support on human rights. Many officials who are involved in human rights abuses are affiliated with the IRGC and close to the team that run the nuclear program. For instance, General Mohammad Reza Naqdi is the commander of the Basij militia and also in the U.N. black list. 12 years ago, he was convicted in a Tehran

court to three months prison for his involvement in torture of prisoners. He was also involved in crackdowns on students during the student movement a decade ago. Human rights are abused mostly by IRGC and security officers involved in the nuclear program. Therefore, supporting human rights in Iran and pressuring its violators is not only a moral cause, but should be a strategic long-term policy for the United States. The Iranian people, under a democratic government, can be a reliable partner for building regional peace in the Middle East and an example for other Islamic countries in their path toward democracy.