

Contra Iran: A View to a Coup?

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Throughout Washington's impasse with Iran, many influential Americans have viewed regime change as a panacea that would revoke the country's Axis of Evil membership and turn it into a bastion of democracy. Such thinking gained prominence in the past year, as the prospect of a diplomatic solution became a great deal murkier. Given the disappointing progress of the EU-3 negotiations, it seems unlikely that Iran will give up its nuclear program voluntarily. The question is how to deal with this refusal.

Most neoconservatives favor regime change, and they usually argue such an operation is possible without extensive U.S. military involvement.[1] According to these proponents, there is so much domestic opposition to the religious elite that a U.S. propaganda offensive, combined with financial and logistical assistance to prospective insurgents, would topple the clerics. Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute has boasted, "I have contacts in Iran, fighting the regime. Give me twenty million [dollars] and you'll have your revolution."

The initial stage of the regime-change strategy got underway with the 2005 passage of the Iran Freedom Support Act, followed by a dramatic funding boost the next year. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice outlined, the expanded program primarily funds radio broadcasts and other propaganda activities, and it provides modest support for trade unions and other dissident groups.

Despite the enthusiasm, is regime change really a feasible or worthwhile strategy? And would it actually end Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons, much less nuclear technology? Evidence indicates that the answer to both questions is a firm no.

The regime-change-from-within thesis might seem more plausible had we not heard it before in the run-up to the Iraq War. Indeed, the argument for regime change and the strategy embodied in the Iran Freedom Support Act are eerily reminiscent of Iraq policy between 1998 and 2003. Congress passed and funded an Iraq Liberation Act during that period. American policymakers believed the propaganda of Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress that—with modest financial and logistical support—Iraqi dissidents could overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. It is now apparent that the INC never had more than a meager domestic following, and Chalabi's party garnered less than 0.5 percent of the votes in the December 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections.

There are manipulative (and in some cases utterly objectionable) Iranian exiles waiting in the wings to orchestrate a similar scenario. They include notorious arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar, a shadowy figure from the Iran-Contra scandal. Perhaps the most unsavory

opposition group is the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq (MEK), included on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations since 1997.

The MEK is the military wing of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), regarded by many neoconservatives as a key ally in the regime change effort. Moving its base of operations from France to Iraq in 1986, the MEK was reportedly funded by Saddam Hussein's Ba'athi regime and sent into combat against Iran. Founded on a combination of Islamism and Marxism, the MEK has a long history of terrorism and cult-like behavior. Currently led by a married couple, Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, the organization has become a cult of personality, repeatedly purging individuals from its inner circle. As journalist Connie Bruck notes: "When, in June 2003, Maryam was arrested and imprisoned in France, several of her followers in Europe immolated themselves. Today, images of Maryam and Massoud Rajavi gaze out from walls in M.E.K. offices and barracks in Iraq and adorn placards and T-shirts at M.E.K. demonstrations." There is also a distressing amount of regimentation. The organization mandates vows of celibacy in its Iraqi camps, and it ruthlessly suppresses dissent from the Rajavis' dictates. Former MEK members report that comrades who sought to leave were imprisoned or killed.

That reputation does not discourage some regime change proponents from making common cause with MEK activists. In May 2003, scholars Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy recommended that "when the secretary of state next decides whether or not to re-certify the MEK as a terrorist organization", that official "should come to the sensible conclusion that it poses no threat to the security of the United States or its citizens." Pipes and Clawson went on to praise the MEK as a potential ally, citing the organization's "key information" about Iran's nuclear program and other activities.

Setting aside the wisdom of supporting groups like the MEK, Americans should doubt assurances that significant U.S. military assistance would be unnecessary. In the case of Iraq, regime change advocates quietly buried such assurances when they became impatient with Saddam Hussein's continuing power. Saddam's overthrow required massive U.S. military power, with the much-touted exiles playing the role of embarrassing hangers-on. If the United States adopts a strategy of regime change in Iran, it too will demand extensive U.S. efforts.

There is little doubt that Iranians increasingly dislike the repressive mullahs—but that does not make them fond of the United States, a 2006 Zogby poll found. A good many Iranians remember that the United States interfered once before in their country's internal affairs (the 1953 coup), and that the outcome was not a happy one. Moreover, virtually all populations resent pressure and interference from foreign powers. Citizens typically rally around the incumbent regime and reject opposition figures tainted by foreign influence, even if the public might normally be sympathetic to those reformers' political values—and in this case, most Iranians regard the MEK as a collection of odious terrorists, and evidence of Washington's collaboration with such elements would be especially resented.

Some Iranian dissidents are very nervous that open American endorsements could be the kiss of death. Washington's support gives the religious hierarchy a perfect pretext to portray even cautious political reformers as American stooges. Iranian human rights activist Emad Baghi complained: "We are under pressure from both the hard-liners in the judiciary and that stupid George Bush." Vahid Pourostad, editor of the pro-reform *National Trust* newspaper, noted that whenever the United States "supported an idea publicly, the public has done the opposite."

Perhaps the regime change thesis's most bizarre incarnation is the notion that military intervention is a needed catalyst. By this line of thinking, the Iranian people would be so enraged at the clerics for bringing destruction upon them that they would overthrow the regime. *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol is most explicit with this rationale. Asserting that "the Iranian people dislike their regime", he predicted on Fox News in July 2006 that "the right use of military force could cause them to reconsider whether they really want to have this regime in power."

The historical record lends this logic—dubious on its face—little support. Bombing Iran would almost certainly be counterproductive to the goal of regime change. One only need look back a few months, to the surge in Hizballah's popularity during the Israeli incursion into Lebanon, to realize that such thinking is naive. Earlier episodes point to a similar conclusion. Despite massive bombing of Germany and Japan in World War II, the fascist regimes remained in power to the bitter end. The American bombing of North Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s did not dislodge Ho Chi Minh or his successors from power. NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 actually increased Slobodan Milosevic's popularity for a time. It was not until one year later, and based on domestic issues, that the democratic opposition got rid of him.

Still, it is possible that the most ardent supporters of a regime-change policy would be willing to roll the dice. But there is one problem with the regime change strategy that cannot be ignored: Even if the United States brought a secular, democratic government to power, said government would not necessarily end the nuclear program.

Neoconservative policymakers have come to regard Iran's nuclear program as symptomatic of the clerical regime, while overlooking the fact that the American-backed shah founded the program under much more ostensibly martial auspices. Indeed, in 1967, the United States provided Tehran with a 5mw thermal research reactor—three years before Iran ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In one instance, the shah even affirmed the non-civilian nature of his country's nuclear ambitions, stating that Iran would develop nuclear weapons "without a doubt and sooner than one would think." Ironically, the Ayatollah Khomeini halted the program for several years after the Islamic Revolution, deeming nuclear weapons contrary to Islam.

Iran is located in a volatile and hostile region. Iranians are still emotionally scarred by Iraq's 1980 invasion and the long, bloody war that followed. Russia, Israel, Pakistan and India all have nuclear weapons, so regional deterrence issues probably loom large for

Tehran. Those security concerns would not change significantly for a democratic government.

Moreover, the vast majority of Iranian citizens seem to favor an indigenous nuclear program, whether for solely peaceful purposes or not—whatever the consequences. According to a January 2006 poll by the Iranian Students Polling Agency, 85 percent of Iranians support the program. When told it would bring economic sanctions, 64 percent still supported the program. (After decades of American embargoes, sanctions no longer rattle the Iranian public. “The sanctions will be useless”, insists one Tehran resident. “We do not have much foreign investment now either.”) However, the poll’s most striking finding is that 56 percent of respondents supported the program in the face of a military strike. And should that strike take place, “only one in six would blame Iran’s own government” for precipitating it.

To be sure, hefty doses of state propaganda influence such opinions. Yet even reformers support the program. Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, a liberal Iranian critic, warned Washington not to attack: “We will defend our country till the last drop of blood.” Those are the words of a pro-Western, liberal Iranian, so one can only imagine what those less hostile to the current government think.

The nuclear program has come to symbolize Iranian scientific prestige, upon which the nation prides itself in a way somewhat surprising for such a conservative state. For example, Iranian scientists performing stem cell research receive government funding and enjoy one of the most broadly permissive policies in the world, orders of magnitude more so than current American regulations that effectively prohibit federal funding. In terms of the national psyche, this scientific prowess represents Iran’s global and regional influence, which most Iranians believe should be robust.

It is apparent that the Iranian nuclear program has come to embody more than the odious regime that stewards it. The broad support renders the question of what to do particularly difficult, as it is almost certain the program will continue with or without Western approval, no matter what regime is in power. Indeed a new, democratic government might find itself under considerable popular pressure to demonstrate nationalist credentials—and prove it is not a U.S. puppet.

True, if a nuclear-armed Iran were democratic, it would significantly ease Washington’s concerns that the country might pose an undeterrable threat to America’s security. Michael Ledeen told the House International Relations Committee that the nuclear threat “is inseparable from the nature of the regime.” If the clerical regime were not in power, there would not be such a “sense of urgency.” On another occasion, Ledeen conceded that a democratic Iran might continue a quest for nuclear weapons, but that “a democratic Iran will not be inclined to commit hara-kiri by launching a first strike against Israel, nor will it likely brandish its bombs against the United States.” Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, states: “Were Iran ruled by even an imperfect democratic government, we would be much less concerned about its weaponry.”

But even a democratic Iran with nukes would undermine another major U.S. policy goal: preventing further nuclear proliferation. There is a very real prospect that if Iran develops a nuclear arsenal, sooner or later other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, would follow suit. And it is unlikely to make much difference to these countries whether a nuclear-capable Iran is democratic or undemocratic. What will matter is that a regional rival has that capability.

The regime change option is a fantasy maintained by those enamored with their own ideology. It has no realistic chance of toppling the Iranian regime or halting nuclear proliferation. On the contrary, it is a dangerous caprice that, if adopted as policy, would be ineffective at best and seriously damaging to American interests at worst. The only way to prevent the nuclearization of any country is through incentives that make non-proliferation more attractive than nuclear weaponry. In the case of Iran, this means addressing the country's security concerns and vibrant nationalism, rather than inflaming them. Such realism, though, means abandoning the illusion that regime change would be an easy and definitive solution.

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[1] American proponents of regime change were active even before the current nuclear crisis developed; most hawks previously emphasized Tehran's support for terrorist organizations as the principal justification for seeking to oust the government. Of course, calls for regime change have become even more pronounced since Hizballah captured two Israeli soldiers in northern Israel in July 2006.