AMERICA, EUROPE AND THE CHALLENGE OF BRINGING DEMOCRACY TO IRAN

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Iran poses more and greater challenges to the United States and Europe—and to the transatlantic relationship—than practically any other country in the world. Its suspected nuclear weapons program, if allowed to be brought to fruition, could directly threaten European and American security. Even short of that, an Iranian nuclear weapons capability could fatally damage the nuclear nonproliferation regime and lead other regional states—including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey—to rethink their own non-nuclear status. A nuclear Iran might also feel more confident in continuing to support regional terrorist movements like Hizbollah and Hamas, which is another way in which Iran threatens Western interests. Iran's support for terrorism and opposition to Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts continue to make it harder to stabilize a region in which both America and Europe have fundamental strategic, economic and moral interests.

Iran's ability to cause trouble for the West—and within the West—underscores why Europe and the United States have a stake in the democratic evolution of the Iranian political system. To be sure, even a democratic or liberal Iranian government would have national interests, historical grievances with the United States, nuclear ambitions, and differences with the state of Israel. But it would also provide a much better opportunity for resolving these differences, to say nothing of what such a change would do for the well-being of the Iranian people. A more democratic and liberal Iran that ended its support for terrorism and stopped undermining the Arab-Israeli peace process would immediately become a friend of both Europe and the United States. It would not necessarily foreswear nuclear weapons, but it would be more easily persuaded to do so with economic incentives, and less threatening even if it did procure such weapons. Trade and investment would pour into Iran, to the benefit of the Iranian people, while the West would have new and secure access to energy that would help reduce its dependence on countries like Saudi Arabia. It is hard to see how such a change in Iran's government would not be positive either for the Iranian people or the West—only the Mullahs and their (diminishing number of) current supporters would lose.

The question, of course, is how to help Iran move in such a direction, and the answers are not obvious. Even if most evidence suggests the Iranian people want change, it is not clear how to support their efforts to achieve it. The hopes that the regime would reform from within, stimulated initially by the surprise election of Mohammed Khatami in 1997, have largely faded. Khatami has not turned out to be Gorbachev, or at least the clerical regime has not turned out to be the Brezhnev Politburo. Similarly, hopes that student protests of the early 2000s would produce change from outside the regime have also failed to pan out. Either the student movement proved too weak, or the regime itself proved too resilient, but there are few today who believe that Iran is on the verge of a revolution. The clerics having banned most of the possible presidential candidates from running in the June 17 elections, Iranians are faced with the choice of conservative or ultra-conservative candidates and nothing else.

The issue of helping to bring democracy to Iran is further complicated by the issue of the nuclear program. For even if the West knew how to go about democratization, that goal competes with the

necessity of seeking to persuade the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear aspirations. What to do, for example, if Iran's condition for abandoning the nuclear fuel cycle—the only possible guarantee that it is not building nuclear weapons—is Western trade and investment, the delivery of which might provide a lifeline to an otherwise failing and unpopular regime? Should the West accept the deferral of its democratization goals in favor of dealing with the nuclear issue? If not, the risk is that the nuclear clock may be ticking faster than the democratization clock—in other words, by the time our efforts to promote a more liberal and democratic Iran succeed, as eventually they almost certainly will—it may be too late to prevent the nuclear proliferation.

Americans and Europeans do not see eye-to-eye on all these issues. Americans are certainly preoccupied with the Iranian nuclear issue, but they are doubtful a deal can really be struck that would guarantee and end to the Iranian nuclear program, and they are reluctant to reward Iran for bad behavior. Europeans also have concerns about Iran's support for terrorism and opposition to peace with Israel, but they are skeptical about our ability to bring about regime transformation, and more willing to set those issues aside if a nuclear deal can be done. What is really needed is a common Western strategy that seeks both to stop Iran's nuclear weapons program without foregoing efforts to bring about political change in Iran.

The US, Europe and Democracy in the Middle East

The Bush administration's decision to put democratization at the heart of American foreign policy began, like much else, with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Americans cared about democracy before 9/11, of course, but the priority was nowhere near the same. Before America was attacked, Washington had an informal "deal" with Middle Eastern regimes, which essentially consisted of telling them that their internal affairs were their own business so long as they provided the United States with energy supplies and did not threaten its strategic interests in the region. But after 9/11 that old deal was no longer valid. To be sure, the United States could not from one day to the next withdraw its support from all its longstanding allies in the region, but it now the price of supporting repressive regimes was clear—not just for the people of the region but for the United States itself.

What many Americans decided after 9/11 was that the fundamental problem besetting the greater Middle East is the frustration and even humiliation felt by so many of those who live there because of the repressive nature of the regimes that govern them. Many Europeans (and Americans, for that matter), are uncomfortable with President Bush's expansive rhetoric about "freedom," and it is true that Bush and other Americans sometimes talk too simplistically about bringing democracy to the Middle East. That does not, however, change the fact that Bush is right when he declares that "[Sixty] years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe.… As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export."[1]

Muslims themselves, of course—at least in the Arab world—have been making much the same point, noticing that they missed out on the wave of democracy that transformed Latin American and East

[1] See George W. Bush, "Freedom in Iraq and the Middle East," Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C., November 6, 2003, p. 2.

Asia in the late 1980s and 1990s. They have often stressed that "reform from within … is a far more proper and sustainable alternative" to change imposed from abroad, but they also welcome Western support for their efforts to spread democracy in the region.[2] Middle Easterners and outsiders as well acknowledge that the region suffers from some distinct and deep-seated social, demographic and political problems and that most societies have fallen well behind in terms of modernization. The result has been a growing level of frustration and resentment among its peoples—which can only be addressed through fundamental political and economic change.

Europeans have often been reluctant to run the risk of instability associated with political change, and they certainly do not share the Bush administration's belief that force may sometimes be necessary to make democracy possible. But there have been some encouraging signs of transatlantic convergence on this issue. In June 2004, the G8 and NATO summits committed the United States and Europe to work together with the countries and peoples in the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) to strengthen freedom, democracy, and prosperity throughout the region. These efforts build and supplement long-standing European and American efforts to engage the region through the EU's Barcelona process and new neighborhood initiative, NATO's Mediterranean dialogue, and the U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative.

Moreover, some recent progress toward democratization in the Middle East also led some Europeans to be more supportive of the Bush agenda. Successful elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq; "people power" in the streets of Lebanon leading to a Syrian military withdrawal; women voting in Kuwait; Egypt's announcement of more competitive presidential elections; and even regional elections in Saudi Arabia all contributed to the notion that perhaps the region was not entirely immune to the democratic wave after all. Many Europeans now accept, as French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier put it in March 2005, that "a more democratic world is the guarantee of a more secure world."[3] While major transatlantic differences thus clearly remain, there are growing indications that Europeans increasingly acknowledge the virtues of America's democratic agenda. Leaders and experts on both sides of the Atlantic are looking at ways to help: increasing contacts to local NGOs; sponsoring free media; supporting education reform; imposing diplomatic penalties for the lack of reform; and making foreign aid, trade and investment conditional on more open political systems.

The Unique Case of Iran

Even to the extent Europeans and Americans agree on promoting democracy for the Muslim world, Iran poses particular challenges—and is in many ways different from the Arab world. First, whereas in most Arab countries the West must deal with relatively pro-American leaders and deeply anti-American populations, in Iran the reverse is true. Much of the population seems supportive of the United States, while the leadership is extremely hostile and unwilling to consider engagement with the United States. This is a potentially positive difference with most Arab countries, since it means that genuine democracy might lead to a more pro-American orientation, whereas free votes in many Arab countries might produce the reverse.

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[2] The quote is from the *Arab Development Report 2003* (New York: United Nations), p. 2.

[3] See the interview with Barnier, « Un monde plus sûr, plus démocratique devra être aussi un monde plus juste, » *Le Monde*, March 2, 2005.

A second major difference is that, to the extent that one democracy promotion tool might be the threat of withholding trade or aid from the regime in question, in Iran the United States has no aid or trade to withhold. Short of the use of military force—which is impractical as a way of promoting democracy in Iran, since it would probably provoke a nationalist reaction and give the regime an excuse to hold power—Washington has few "sticks" at its disposal.

The fact that it can only offer "carrots" brings us to a third major difference between Iran and most of the regional Arab regimes: Iran is believed to be pursuing a nuclear weapons program, which makes offering "carrots" in exchange only for democratization extremely problematic. Absent the nuclear threat, it might make most sense to flood Iran with aid and trade, and count on the development of an Iranian middle class to demand democratization, a process seen elsewhere in places like South Korea, Mexico and Indonesia. But the United States—and even Europe—are reluctant to provide major economic incentives to Iran so long as it is not providing objective guarantees that no secret nuclear program exists. As noted before, to the extent that the nuclear issue is the priority, the United States and Europe might feel obliged to use all their leverage to deal with that issue, leaving no incentives or disincentives left to use for democratization.

Finally, Iran is different because whereas in most Arab countries the terrorism stems from repressed citizens who have turned to violence and Islamic extremism to get their way, in Iran it is mostly the other way around. The terrorism is state sponsored, and public anger seems directed more at the regime itself than at the outside world. None of the 9/11 hijackers were from Iran (as opposed to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where the governments are allied with the United States), nor have Iranians been prominent or even present on the battlefields in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Promoting Democracy in Iran

Some of these factors make democracy promotion in Iran even more difficult than it is in Arab countries, but that does not mean that nothing can be done. The first step is to persuade Western—particularly European—governments that the emergence of a more democratic and liberal Iran is strongly in their interest. Such an Iran would be a good friend of the West, would contribute to stability in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel, and would help lessen Western energy dependence on Saudi Arabia. Even as they pursue their diplomacy over Iran's nuclear program, and while accepting that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside, it would be an important step at least to acknowledge what the goal should be.

Beyond that, both the United States and Europe can do more than they currently are doing to promote democracy in Iran—some of which are similar to what both are doing in the BMENA program—and some of which are different. Most important would be to do more to promote a free and open media in Iran, including Persian language broadcasts from beyond Iran's borders. The more aware the Iranian people are of their government's corruption, and of developments toward freedom and human rights in other countries, the less tolerant they will be of the restrictions that exist in Iran. The U.S. government currently sponsors four news broadcasts per day by the Voice of America, which (despite an ill-enforced ban on satellite dishes) recent surveys suggest are seen by some 10% of the Iranian population. Those broadcasts recently included interviews with a student leader and a political activist who criticized Iranian

clerics for barring hundreds of candidates from the upcoming presidential election.[4] That is the type of open debate and information that Iranian citizens need continuous access too—and it would have even more of an impact if Europeans operated the same sort of station. The $2-3 million per year the United States government spends on such programming is a very small amount given the stakes involved. (It is, for example, less than the United States spends every day in Iraq.)

The West should also do more to promote contacts between Iran's citizens and the West, including through educational and cultural exchanges. Given the deep suspicions between the United States and Iran, much of this might be better done initially with Europe—to which Iranians can more easily travel—and with Europeans who can travel to Iran. Again, the more isolated Iran is, the easier it will be for the clerical regime to keep a grip on Iranian society. The more Iranians see of the outside world, they more they will want to take their fate into their own hands. Efforts by Europeans to show Iranians what living differently might look like could have an effect in Iran, much as East German exposure to West Germany gradually created a desire among East Germans to get rid of their corrupt and autocratic leaders. Western contacts with democratizers and opposition groups in Georgia and Ukraine over the years—even at times when it looked like democracy in those countries was only a distant prospect—paid off in recent years when people there took to the streets to demand political change. Westerners will obviously have to be careful lest anyone they support be tainted by charges that they are serving outside interests; but this is probably less a problem in Iran—where average people appear to want outside involvement—than in most of the Arab world.

Finally, Americans and Europeans who want to see an evolution of Iran's political system must not let a prospective nuclear deal get in the way of the pursuit of that goal. If an airtight deal on the nuclear issue can be done with Iran—the elimination of Iran's nuclear enrichment, reprocessing and related activities in exchange for economic and diplomatic incentives—it is probably worth doing, on the grounds that a bird in the hand (elimination of the nuclear program) is better than two in the bush (the *prospect* of a more democratic and liberal Iran). Since we really have very little understanding of the dynamics of political change, and have little idea when that might come about in Iran, it is probably not sensible to oppose a nuclear arrangement with Iran in the hope that doing so will somehow quicken the pace of democratization. But America and Europe should both agree that the real rewards for Iran—normalization of relations and investment in the energy sector—will only come once Iran ends support for terrorism and provides more freedom for its own citizens. We might have to deal with the Iranian regime in order to end its nuclear program (just as we dealt with the Soviet Union to preserve détente in Europe) but that does not mean that we have to legitimize it or cease our efforts to promote political change.

Americans and Europeans should not exaggerate their ability to shape the political future of Iran. As their own efforts in that country just over 50 years ago demonstrate, it is not easy to determine another country's government, and efforts to do so can sometimes backfire. U.S. efforts over the past 15 years to bring about positive regime change in Iraq have not exactly been without setbacks either. Still, the difficulty of changing the status quo Iran does not require Westerners, or anyone else, to accept it, nor should it deter them from doing what they can to change it. To the extent they succeed they—and surely the Iranians themselves—will be much better off.

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[4] See Steven R. Weisman, "U.S. Expands Aid to Iran's Democracy Advocates Abroad," *New York Times*, May 29, 2005.