

Iran hearing - Maloney testimony

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U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

February
21, 2008

Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about religious freedom, human rights and U.S. policy options toward Iran. It is a privilege to participate in a serious discussion of this complex issue. Given the scope of our concerns about Tehran's foreign policy, particularly its nuclear ambitions and involvement with terrorist organizations, security issues inevitably dominate our public discourse on Iran. This does not, however, reflect the complete array of our interests with respect to Iran, and it is important to communicate to both the Iranian leadership and the Iranian people that the broad issues of human rights and civil freedoms rank as a high priority for the United States. In my remarks, I hope to offer some thoughts on the broad trends underway within Iran, highlight several specific points on the situation for human rights and religious freedom today, and provide general recommendations on constructing an approach to this dimension of our policy concerns.

Politics and Society in Iran
Today

Nearly 30 years have passed since Iranians gathered by the tens of millions in the streets and drove their monarchy from power. Iran's revolution reshaped the country, the region and its interaction with the rest of the world, especially the United States. The majority of those living in Iran today are too young to remember this period, and yet the Islamic Revolution remains the defining narrative for Iran's political, social and economic development. By virtue of its size, history, resources,

and strategic location, Iran under any circumstances would pose special relevance for American policy, as it did throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

However, the 1979 revolution and the political system created in its wake have placed Iran squarely at the center of America's international challenges for the past 29 years. That revolution, and the chaos and internecine civil war that followed, enshrined the Islamic Republic, which is arguably the world's first and only modern Muslim theocracy. It also established Iran as the epicenter of a wave of religiously-inspired activism and virulent anti-Americanism that would eventually radiate through the region and across the globe. Since that time, Iran's society and its political dynamics have undergone an evolution nearly as dramatic and unpredictable as the revolution itself, but its leadership remains committed to two singular dimensions of the state's legitimacy - its religious inspiration and orientation and its antagonism, even defiance, toward Washington's role as the sole remaining superpower.

It is important to note that Iran's political system effectively represents a fusion of theocratic and democratic institutions and ideals, in which power is bifurcated between the office of the supreme (religious) leader, who holds ultimate and ostensibly divine authority, and the legitimizing force of the popular vote, which has featured prominently in the present Iranian system of rule. This dual and dueling structure of government is a function of the contradictory demands of the broad revolutionary coalition that coalesced to topple the Shah. The constituents of this coalition shared little beyond their intense frustration with the monarchy; their interests, motivations, and visions for the post-revolutionary state diverged substantially, and in some cases placed them in direct confrontation with one another. The result was a unique framework of competing institutions with Orwellian titles that facilitated the regime's religiously ordained repression at the same time as it nurtured the democratic aspirations of its citizenry.

It is also important to emphasize the persistence of competition within the Islamic Republic's political elite - entrenched rivalries that in recent years have engaged Iran's population directly at the ballot box. From the outset of the revolution and throughout the past three decades, Iran's leadership has been riven by infighting that persisted and even intensified after each successful purge. While Iran's dissension is frequently discounted as mere intra-elite squabbling, the regime's fierce battles and profound philosophical differences have helped to preserve political and religious space.

These tensions have helped to generate Iran's recent experiment in democratic reform. To the surprise of many Iranians and observers, the regime's splintered authority and vicious power struggle generated what in retrospect must be acknowledged as a serious and authentic effort to reconcile democratic institutions and values with Iran's self-imposed Islamic constraints. In one of Iran's many ironies, this reform movement had its roots in the regime's attempt to impose greater control over its fractious institutions, during the 1992 parliamentary elections. The electoral process

sidelined a number of influential political actors who had opposed then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani's economic reforms. From their refuge in universities, think tanks and semi-governmental institutions, these "Islamic leftists" began to reassess the state they had helped create and also to plot their way back into political power. Their reconsiderations coincided with the coming of age of a new generation of Iranians, as well as a potent new intellectual dynamic within Iran's seminaries and clerical circles.

The result of these trends was the 1997 election of a moderate cleric to the presidency and an eight-year experiment in trying to reform the Islamic Republic from within, with an emphasis on reasserting the revolution's original republican ideals through the empowerment of the state's elected institutions. For regime conservatives, this reform movement was anathema; the central tenets of its agenda affronted their vision of an Islamic moral order and threatened to undermine the theological foundations of the state. They struck back with a vengeance through their control of key state institutions, depriving reformists of their initiatives, their popular mandate, and their key strategists and constituencies.

The 2005 presidential elections closed the door on the reform movement and signaled the opening salvo of a new era in the politics of the Islamic Republic, an era marked by the re-ascendance of the conservatives, albeit with a prominent role for a new generation. Surprisingly, the previously-unknown President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has already left a dramatic imprint on Iran's foreign and domestic policies and the national psyche. Despite the institutional impotence of his office and his limited experience on the national and international stage, Ahmadinejad has been unexpectedly central to Iran's internal and external dilemmas. By asserting himself and inserting himself, Ahmadinejad has made himself far more relevant than most observers anticipated and has shifted the environment within Iran for civil rights and freedoms in a dramatically negative fashion. In doing so, he has benefited from the quiet but consistent support of Iran's supreme leader, a conducive international climate, and his own formidable political skills.

Iran's Future Political Trajectory

Examining Iran's future must begin with one simple and unfortunate truth: for the foreseeable future, the Islamic Republic is here to stay. While there is broad-based antagonism toward the regime, there is no real opposition movement or a credible strategy for mass mobilization. Although the majority of

Iranians are unequivocally disenchanted with their political leaders and system, they have demonstrated that they are not yet prepared to take that frustration to the streets. Nor has an organization or potential leader yet emerged with the discipline or the stamina to sustain a major confrontation with the forces of the government. Having endured the disappointment of their last democratic experiment gone awry, Iranians appear weary of political turmoil and, at least for the time being, resigned to some more effective evolutionary process to improve their political circumstances.

In the short term, the resurgence of Iran's conservatives over the past five years predictably has accelerated their fragmentation; having propelled the reformists to the sidelines, Iran's hard-liners are now fighting amongst themselves much more publicly than ever. Traditionalists are unnerved by Ahmadinejad's radical persona and policies, and even some younger generation hardliners responsible for the president's early rise have distanced themselves from him. Conservative splintering is beginning to have an impact at the ballot box, and December 2006 elections were widely viewed as a rebuke to Ahmadinejad and a signal that the conservative reconquest of Iran's elective institutions would be neither eternal nor unchallenged.

For their part, Iran's reformists are beginning to reassert themselves on the national political stage, focusing their message on Ahmadinejad's excesses and seeking to reclaim some place within the country's elective institutions. Their goal is to claw their way back to political relevance, assume greater influence in shaping Iranian policies, and position themselves to credibly contest the 2009 presidential elections. Given the weight of the conservative domination of the electoral system, a reformist comeback is at best an iffy proposition. And even if they were to somehow regain a foothold in the Majlis or other state institutions, it remains unclear if the reformists can advance a common positive agenda for Iran's future beyond their critique of the current leadership.

These contending forces will play themselves out in dramatic fashion in the relatively near future, through parliamentary elections that will be held in Iran on March 14. Based on news to date from Iran, there is little reason to believe that this balloting will provide a serious opening for critics of Iran's Islamic orthodoxy, or what any credible observer would characterize as a remotely free or fair opportunity for the Iranian people's voice to be heard. But it would be a grave mistake to discount the significance of these elections for Iran's future, as the Bush Administration has been wont to do during previous election seasons. The sharp contrast between Ahmadinejad and his predecessor Mohammad Khatami, both personally and in the climate that they helped cultivate internally, speaks volumes as to the salience of the electoral process in Iran for the wide range of state policies - and particularly those issues that we are here to discuss today.

Moreover, it is also clear that the intra-elite politicking that is particularly intense in Iranian electoral contests can have profound influence on the political and social environment over the long term.

The consequences of the 1992 parliamentary elections were not evident to outside observers until five years later, with the emergence of the reform movement and 1997 election of Khatami.

Similarly, the implications of the current divisions among Iran's conservatives and the dynamics of the upcoming election will play themselves over the long term in ways that we simply cannot predict. At the very least, the outcome of March 14's balloting will presage the context for the next presidential election, which is expected to take place in 2009.

Despite his manifest difficulties with both Iran's political elites as well as its population, it would be a mistake to presume that the era of Ahmadinejad is inherently on the wane. The president benefits from the authority to stack the deck in his own favor, as well as from his patrons in the hard-line clergy, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Supreme Leader's office. Moreover, even if Ahmadinejad somehow passes from the scene, there is every reason to believe that the legacy of his ideological fervor and the constituency whose worldview he has represented - sometimes called "neoconservatives" - will continue to shape the options available to any future Iranian leader.

Still, in any discussion of Iran's future trajectory, it is vital to recall that those outside of Iran have not proven particularly prescient in forecasting that country's future. Most of the abrupt changes that Iran has undergone over the past three decades - including the catalytic elections of both Khatami and Ahmadinejad - have defied the expectations and predictions of both scholars and pundits. As a result, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that the most likely path for Iran will be the one that belies all predictions.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Iran

Any discussion of religious freedoms in Iran must be set within the broader context for human rights and civil liberties under the current leadership. In this regard, recent trends within Iran have been particularly unfortunate. The era of Ahmadinejad has had a manifestly detrimental impact on Iran's political and social environment. Censorship of books and other media has intensified dramatically; Islamic dress codes and other social prohibitions are being enforced with renewed vigor; and perhaps most significantly, the regime has targeted intellectual, dissidents, student activists, lawyers, union leaders, and human rights advocates for repression and imprisonment.

Emblematic of Ahmadinejad's approach to human rights has been his appointment of two individuals to his cabinets with infamous track records on this issue. Interior Minister Mustafa Purmohammadi and Intelligence Minister Gholamhussein Mohseni Ezhei have been cited by Human Rights Watch and other organizations for their roles in several notorious episodes of human rights abuses in Iran, including the execution of political prisoners in the 1980s, the murders of

dissidents and writers by Intelligence Ministry agents in the 1990s, and the prosecution of Shi'a clerics for espousing alternative theological viewpoints. Their records were so deeply and patently problematic that some members of the conservative parliament hesitated to confirm these individuals to their posts out of concern that their diplomatic travel and interactions would be limited. Equally telling - and outrageous - was the decision of the current Iranian leadership to include the despicable Saeed Mortazavi, Tehran's prosecutor general, in its 2006 delegation to the United Nation's Human Rights Council in Geneva. Mortazavi is well-known as the "butcher of the press" for his aggressive role in shuttering reformist publications and imprisoning journalists during the Khatami era, and is very credibly alleged to have participated directly in the 2003 interrogations of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian-Iranian photojournalist. Those interrogations included physical abuse and torture, which resulted in Kazemi's death while in custody. Her abusers have never been brought to justice, and the inclusion of Mortazavi in any official Iranian activities on human rights has been appropriately described by Human Rights Watch as illustrative of the leadership's utter contempt for the very concept and process. Like the inclusion of Mohseni Ezhei and Purmohammadi, the empowerment of Mortazavi speaks to an appalling brutality that resides in certain elements of the Iranian leadership, and that is tolerated by an even wider range of officials.

Several of the other panelists at this hearing have special expertise on the specific dimensions of Iran's abuses toward its minority populations, and both the Department of State and the non-governmental organizations that focus on human rights issues maintain comprehensive databases of discriminatory elements of Iran's legal framework as well as individual and generalized cases of persecution and abuse. These are the most authoritative sources on human rights and religious freedom in Iran outside of the country and its indigenous activists, and there can be no serious dissension surrounding the conclusions that they reach.

The inequities and injustices of the Islamic Republic's treatment of minority religious groups are long established and widely acknowledged and decried. The post-revolutionary state did build in protections and guarantees for political representation designed to preserve the status of several minorities, including Zoroastrians and several primarily Christian ethnic groups, such as Armenians and Assyrians, as well as Iran's Jewish population. This reflects both traditional Islamic tolerance toward "peoples of the book" as well as a recognition of the significant legacy that these communities retain within Iran's storied history and inherently diverse national identity. The official space granted to sanctioned religious minorities, as well as the popular commitment to Iran's multi-ethnic identity and the courageous leadership of these communities, has preserved their existence and even their vitality in the face of tremendous odds. Even today, in a country whose president has repeatedly engaged in Holocaust denial and incendiary rhetoric vis-à-vis Israel, Iran retains the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside of the Jewish state, and anecdotal reports suggest that life for Iranian Jews has remained relatively unchanged under Ahmadinejad.

Nonetheless, it is clear that even members of these "protected" groups have experienced a wide variety of dilemmas since the establishment of an Islamic state. Thousands fled during the revolution and the Khomeini era, and while explicit repression of Jews, Zoroastrians and mainstream Christian denominations is at a relatively low ebb in today's Iran, the legal framework and social context for minority religions in a state that espouses an absolutist and revolutionary Islamic order is inherently problematic and insecure.

Several

other minority religious groups have not fared so well, most notably the Bahai community, which has been actively and forcefully repressed by the Islamic Republic since the revolution. As other panelists will no doubt detail, Bahais are denied their basic rights to practice their religion or even acknowledge their faith. Their educational opportunities are limited, their beliefs are routinely castigated in the official media and state sermons, and the security services have imprisoned many Bahai leaders. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that persecution of Bahais has intensified under Ahmadinejad, and this trend would certainly be consistent with the virulent ideological strand of Shia Islam associated with the president and his allies.

As recently as last month, 51 Bahais were reported to have been convicted for engaging in activities counter to the Islamic system, apparently accused of engaging in proselytism.

Beyond the considerable suffering of the Bahais, it is worth drawing attention to several other

communities that have been the focus of officially sanctioned repression under the Islamic Republic and in some cases whose predicament has apparently degenerated under the leadership of President Ahmadinejad. Notably, the Islamic Republic has engaged in a series of dramatic skirmishes with Sufis, a mode of Islamic observance deemed by some conservative Iranian clerics as deviationist cults. And while the large Christian denominations benefit from Constitutional protections and parliamentary representation, Iran's leadership has reportedly imprisoned several leaders of the country's tiny evangelical Protestant community.

Finally, leaders of Iran's Sunni populations - which comprise approximately 9 percent of the population primarily among Turkmen, Balouch, Arab and Kurdish ethnic groups, have long complained of official discrimination against their communities.

I'd like to add

a few additional points related to Iran's majority religion. The tendency in discussions on religious freedom, quite understandably, is to focus on individual and generalized cases of persecution, particularly with respect to minority denominations. But the monopolization of religion by the post-revolutionary state in Iran has also posed implications for Iran's majority religion, most of them quite problematic.

Most notably, the establishment and evolution of the office of the Supreme Leader has generated dramatic changes in the nature and structure of religious authority in Iran - and by extension, for the broader Shi'a community. As the clergy assumed a leading role in the revolutionary mobilization, they embraced a political role for the first time in Iran's history. The transfer of religious authority to the state has entailed increasing state bureaucratization and absolutism for the state, and growing politicization for religion. As a result, Iranian politics is now imbued with the sanctity of the divine, while religion has been tainted by the expediency of political prerequisites.

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the practice of Shia Islam in Iran was marked by considerable pluralism and diversity. Shia jurisprudence recognizes the authority of individual clerics to interpret holy law, and historically individual clerics advanced through an informal hierarchy not through a discrete selection process or a finite set of criteria, but through the recognition and assent of his peers, who at the highest levels would typically consist of fewer than 100 fellow ayatollahs and several hundred other close associates. The most widely revered clerics were considered marja-ye taqlid, or source of emulation - a model for their followers and the recipient of their religious tithing and taxation.

The Islamic Republic has effectively bureaucratized a new, and explicitly politicized, Shia hierarchy. This began under Ayatollah Khomeini, who engaged in unprecedented religious repression of other senior clerics who did not support his theory of clerical rule. It has intensified under Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose modest clerical credentials have undermined any notion of meritocratic and consensual leadership among the clergy. Khamenei's ascension to the head of state effectively necessitated a series of Constitutional revisions that have further politicized the process and nature of clerical stature. These revisions eliminated competing offices, such as that of the Prime Minister, and invested the Supreme Leader with greater authority, including "absolute general trusteeship" over the three branches of government and an absolute mandate for the office (velayat-e faqih-ye motlaq). Ironically, the same revisions also downgraded the theological requirements for the office, meaning that as Iran's

Supreme Leader has assumed unconditional authority over the levers of state power, the position's standing within the clerical hierarchy has waned. In other words, despite his unrivalled political authority, Khamenei is clearly outranked by other clerics - notably, a group that includes both Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq and Ayatollah Ali Hussain Montazeri, the man who was once tapped to succeed Khomeini and who is today Iran's most prominent dissidents.

Why should any of this matter to those who care about religious freedom in Iran? The politicization of religion - even the majority religion, especially the majority religion - has a variety of negative implications for structure and practice of religion in Iran. Today, Iranian clerics ascend not by virtue of their scholarship or ability to inspire worshippers, but by virtue of a top-down network of influence and funding that privileges those who adhere to a narrow and particularist interpretation of the role of Shia Islam in government and punishes those with traditionalist or alternative views. The historic institutions of authority in Shiism are being marginalized. And the omnipresence of religious strictures also appears to have redefined young Iranians' relationship with organized religion. A report prepared by the Tehran city council in 2000 estimated that "75 percent of the country's 60 million inhabitants and 86 percent of young students do not say their daily prayers." While many continue to participate in religious ceremonies and commemorations, some scholars have suggested that they do so simply because these events provide among the few officially sanctioned opportunities for mixing with strangers of the opposite sex.

Like so much within Iran's political dynamics, even the most problematic trends provide some room for optimism. Despite the post-revolutionary state's efforts to centralize and systematize Islam, Iran's seminaries have in fact fostered a tremendous amount of intellectual and doctrinal ferment. One of the most interesting developments has been the articulation and exploration of dynamic jurisprudence (fiqh-e puya). Led by the diverse but convergent writings of philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush and clerics Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar, proponents of dynamic jurisprudence argue that religious knowledge is changing, incomplete, and / or pluralistic, and the concomitant need for the clergy to incorporate man's ever-evolving knowledge and experience in non-religious affairs. These doctrinal innovations represent an intellectual dissent against the political and theological implications of the way that power has been organized in the Islamic Republic - and each of these three thinkers - along with many others - has paid the price via prison or hard-liner harassment. While debates among seminarians can hardly be expected to generate meaningful political change on a short-term basis, Iran's recent history demonstrates in fact that some of the most persuasive - and therefore dangerous, from the point of view of the authorities - opponents of the current political system are those who can effectively rebut the regime's reliance on its presumptive divine mandate.

Policy

Iran ranks as

America's most durable foreign policy dilemma.

Over the past 29 years, U.S. policy has focused on addressing the threat posed by Tehran. Times - and governments

- have changed, but the U.S. and Iran remain squarely at odds on such critical

issues as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The Bush Administration has sought a comprehensive approach toward Tehran, one that deals with the multiple issues

of U.S. concern, including Iran's repression of its own citizenry. The U.S. strategy was intended to present Iranian leaders with a stark choice between moderation or isolation, and for a

period Washington enjoyed unprecedented success in persuading a wide coalition

of allies and international actors to support its efforts. Iran itself contributed greatly to uniting the world against it, thanks to Ahmadinejad's truculent rhetoric and the steady

expansion of Iranian influence across the region.

Despite

achieving unprecedented international consensus, the latest U.S. strategy on Iran has borne little fruit. More than

anything, the failure of the current U.S. approach to Iran to achieve its aims

reflects the complexity and intractability of this problem, which has

frustrated American officials from both sides of the political aisle for nearly

30 years. Still, in considering the Bush

diplomacy on Iran and its results, there is obviously much to critique. Most of the Administration's failings can be

traced back to the spectacularly misinformed assumptions about Iran and the region that senior American officials nurtured even in the face of

contradictory evidence - the presumption that the Islamic Republic was on the

verge of collapse; that intensifying concerns about Iran would fundamentally

alter the strategic calculus of the leading Arab states; and that a belated

effort to engage Tehran could succeed while maintaining the posture and rhetoric of regime change. These

misapprehensions are the product of an incredibly limited knowledge base within

the U.S. government about Iran, as well as the antipathy of the Bush

Administration to questioning its own ideological verities.

At the same

time, the Administration also deserves some credit in specific areas - for

engaging in the thankless, dogged toil of building and sustaining a

surprisingly robust international coalition on Iran; for endeavoring to reverse

certain elements of its policy when it was clear; for crafting a serious

diplomatic overture to Iran on its nuclear program. To its credit, the

Administration also recognized that the American diplomatic apparatus for

dealing with Iran was insufficient and dysfunctional, and established a new set

of administrative structures to coordinate all official policy and activities

with respect to Iran. In addition, the

Administration notably placed a priority on reenergizing people-to-people

diplomacy, a particularly constructive role.

Beyond these limited achievements, though, any U.S. administration will face an enormous challenge in trying to devise an effective approach to Iran. Washington should begin with the caveat that panaceas have no place in managing U.S. policy toward Tehran. Both Americans and Iranians occasionally indulge of fantasies that some 'grand bargain' can be achieved that will holistically settle all of the outstanding issues between the two governments. Unfortunately, however, history demonstrates that the depth of the grievances and the complexity of the political contexts on both sides obstructs even the slightest positive movement. Short of a wholesale political transformation in Tehran, however, there is no magic formula for settling this rift.

We may not be in a position to draft a comprehensive settlement, or even a credible road map. However, we can identify a series of general principles that should frame our strategy if we are to be successful. First, and most importantly, a successful American approach to Iran must acknowledge that diplomacy is the only alternative available to U.S. policymakers. We simply do not have a viable military option available to us that would generate a better outcome for our interests across the Middle East. Any resort to force would do little to eliminate the ultimate sources of our concerns, and even these limited benefits would be overwhelmingly offset by a wide range of negative consequences.

The second principle that should anchor any new approach to Iran is an abiding commitment to engagement as one of the indispensable instruments of American statecraft. As Iran's politics have shifted in a more radical right-wing direction, the appeal of engagement has diminished even to those who advocated it during the brief advent of a reformist president and parliament during the late 1990s. However, the best argument for engaging with Iran was never predicated on the relative palatability of our potential interlocutors, but on the seriousness of the differences between our governments and the centrality of the U.S. interests at stake. The international reprobation aimed at Ahmadinejad and his clique is well earned, and yet it is ultimately an insufficient excuse for constraining our own tools for dealing with Tehran. It is both appropriate and potentially effective to engage with Iran even when it is led by individuals whose views and policies we revile.

The aim of diplomacy is to advance interests, not to make friends or endorse enemies. Engagement with Iran is not an automatic path to rapprochement, nor should it imply a unilateral offer of a 'grand bargain.' Rather it would entail a return to the long-held position that we are prepared to talk with Iranian leaders, in a serious and sustained way, in any authoritative dialogue as a means of addressing the profound concerns that its policies pose for U.S. interests and allies. A commitment to engagement with Iran should also incorporate the designation of an authorized and empowered negotiator, and the outlining of a diplomatic process for making progress on the discrete but complex array of issues at stake.

Engaging with

Iran will not be easy, nor will it provide immediate payoffs. Even during the heyday of the reform movement, Washington found little success in persuading Iran to engage in a direct and ongoing dialogue. Tehran ignored the quiet overtures of the Clinton Administration and publicly disparaged the very U.S. gestures that were intended to show goodwill. For the many justified critics of the current Administration's approach to Iran, President Clinton's experience should serve as a reminder of the intricacy and unpredictability of finding an Iranian interlocutor. Still, these failures - along with the stillbirth of the Bush Administration's belated offer to negotiate on Iran's nuclear program - should not discredit diplomacy as a tool for dealing with Tehran. In fact, the highly successful bilateral negotiations and cooperation over Afghanistan in the months following September 11th should prove instructive about the potential payoffs of a serious effort to engage Iran.

Engaging with the

Iranian regime does not imply forsaking our vocal commitment to criticizing Tehran's abuses of its citizens' rights.

We can and should speak out in favor of greater social, political, and economic liberalization in Iran, and we should press vigorously against the regime's repression - greatly increased in recent months - of dissidents, activists and students. Iranian dissidents have repeatedly and vocally testified to the inverse relationship between U.S.-Iranian tensions and the climate for human rights and democracy within the country. We do no disservice to Iran's courageous advocates of a better future for their own people by dealing directly with their leadership, no matter how distasteful.

Finally, any

serious effort to promote human rights and religious freedom in Iran must drive a stake through the heart of the myth of externally-orchestrated regime change. This is no small task - there is much to suggest that the Islamic Republic is vulnerable, and the illusion of an imminent revolution has tempted U.S. administrations and pundits repeatedly over the past three decades. For the Bush Administration, indulging in the misapprehension produced several years of diplomatic inaction and a stream of fruitless and counter-productive public messaging, and eventually tainted even its belated but genuine efforts to initiate dialogue with Tehran. Secretary Rice was forced to resort to a grudging public acknowledgement that the Administration was not seeking regime change, but it was too little and too late to alter the strategic calculus of a regime whose leadership viewed the U.S. as irrevocably opposed to its existence.

Abandoning the

'regime change' fantasy means disbanding or significantly retooling our democracy promotion programming for Iran.

After a thirty-year absence and with the only the most hazy sense of the day-to-day dynamics of the Islamic Republic's politics and society, Washington is unlikely to succeed in attempting to conjure up an opposition or orchestrate political mobilization from a distance.

Failure, however, is hardly the worst-case outcome here; the publicity surrounding our democracy program has already helped spark a revived crackdown on Iranian dissidents and activists, and has constrained and undermined the very civil society we hope to support. Even among the most ardent opponents of the Islamic regime, accepting support from an external government remains highly

taboo, and the notion of American meddling in Iran's internal affairs represents the third rail of Iranian politics, a legacy of the infamous U.S. role in the 1953 coup that unseated Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq.

The country's most prominent dissidents - from Akbar Ganji to Shirin Ebadi to Emad Baqi and many others - have repeatedly condemned the U.S. funding. As a result of this renunciation as well as the formidable logistical obstacles to funneling support to Iranian oppositionists, it remains unclear how much - if any - of the millions already appropriated for the Iran democracy program will ever reach Iranians. In lieu of our high-profile, low-impact democracy program, we should dramatically expand opportunities for Iranians to interact with the rest of the world through exchange programs, scholarships and enhanced access to visas.

Finally, we must recognize that the ideal opportunity for dealing with Tehran will never come; the objective of American policy must be to create the grounds for progress with Iran even if the Iranian internal environment remains hostile or the regional context continues to present challenges. The Bush Administration first embraced a chimerical notion of the regime's vulnerability, and later boxed itself into a corner by insisting that nothing could be achieved so long as the Iranians perceived momentum to be on their side. Secretary Rice brushed off Congressional queries about dialogue with Iran over Iraq in January 2007, saying that approaching Tehran while neighboring Iraq was still in turmoil would be counterproductive.

Timing matters in negotiations, and the concern about the impact of regional dynamics is justifiable, but to avoid diplomatic interface because of a perceived power imbalance is effectively to consign the countries to permanent antagonism. Our interest in addressing the challenges posed by Iran cannot be deferred until we have achieved the most conducive regional balance of power, or until Iran has finally elected the most amenable array of leaders.