

*Testimony before Committee on Foreign Affairs  
US House of Representatives  
Hearings on: "Iran: Recent Developments and Implications for US Policy"  
Chairman: Hon. Howard Berman  
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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen: Let me begin by thanking the Chairman and the Ranking member of the Minority for affording me a chance to speak to your august gathering. The last time I talked here, Congressman Lantos held the gavel and he embodied in his life and vision the best of America as the "city on the hill." I am humbled by his memory.

These are times of great peril and promise in Iran, and in that benighted country's tumultuous relations with the US. Iran is in a purgatory, and in a state of flux but neither of two forces—those advocating reform and those defending the status quo ante—has the power to prevail over the other, at least not yet.

The Islamic regime is shaken to its core. The clerical leadership is in unprecedented disarray and disunity. Some of the most powerful pillars of power in the regime—people like Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Khatami, Karubi and Moussavi, each at one time the head of one of the three branches of government—have created a de facto coalition against the increasingly authoritarian rule of Mr. Khameni and against the dangerous demagogueries of his hand-picked President, Ahmadinejad. It is now emerging as something of a consensus in the opposition that on June 12 this triumvirate organized an electoral coup to keep Ahmadinejad in power.

The Islamic regime in Iran today is an anomaly. It claims to be a Velayat-e Fagih, or the Guardianship of Jurist, but the great bulk of Shiite clergy's highest ranks, or the Ayatollahs have no role in the government. Many of them—foremost amongst them Ayatollah Sistani even disagree with the very concept as stipulated by Ayatollah Khomeini. (In July 15, 2009 edition of *The New Republic*, I have written at greater length about these tensions within Shiite theology. See "The New Democrats: An Intellectual History of the Green Wave.") These ayatollahs have either been silent on the current crisis or taken issue with Mr. Khamenei. Moreover, many of the top ayatollahs inside Iran, like Ayatollah Montazeri (under house-arrest for more than two decades), and ayatollahs Taheri, Sanei, and Amoli have now not only defied Mr. Khamenei but are challenging his very fitness for the job of Leader (or Vali-Fagih.) For this reason alone, we can say that the days of Mr. Khamenei as the absolute leader, whose words were the law the land, have now certainly ended. He might stay in power, but only as a head of a triumvirate that also includes Ahmadinejad, and commanders of the IRGC.

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The rift within the ruling elite is not the only sign of this current crisis. Even according to the regime's announced results in the last stolen presidential election, some fourteen million people voted for the opposition candidate. The reality is far grimmer for the regime. No more than twenty percent of the seventy million population of Iran—and the majority of these are in one form or another wards of the state—can be said to support the status quo. The inability of the regime to create jobs for the million young men and women who enter the job market each year, its inability to solve the chronic economic problems of double-digit inflation and double-digit unemployment (with unemployment amongst the youth, particularly women reaching thirty percent), the structural impasse between some of Islam's misogynist laws and the relentless efforts of the Iranian women, the true harbingers of democracy in Iran in the last two decades, a pandemic of corruption and cronyism in the bureaucracy, the regime's incessant interference in the private lives and public demeanor of its citizens and the people's clear desire for democracy and accountability have all combined to create an insurmountable tension between the people and the regime. One of the most powerful men in the country, Hashemi-Rafsanjani called it a "seething volcano of resentment."

The egregious power grab by Khamenei and his cohorts, and the valor and human dignity of millions of peaceful demonstrators in Tehran and other big cities have also changed the dynamics of Iranian Diaspora politics. In spite of years of brutality by the regime, the large Iranian Diaspora had been, till recently surprisingly inactive. Now all across this country and in Europe, groups of concerned Iranians have formed to help the cause of democracy in Iran. As we speak here today, hundreds of Iranians, supported by an impressively large number of prominent American intellectual and scholars have heeded Akbar Ganji's call and are participating in a three-day hunger strike in front of the UN building in New York. On the twenty-fifth of this month, all across the world, there will be demonstrations of solidarity with Iranian democratic movement. These activities will help create a constructive dialogue in the American and European politics about realities in Iran, and the dialogue and the new level of awareness are sure to lead to the development a more informed policy in the capitals of these democracies.

But the most poignant reminder of the tensions inside Iran that have created the current impasse was Rafsanjani's anticipated speech during the Friday sermon. The fact that in spite of Ahmadinejad's incessant attacks on him and his family, Rafsanjani could still deliver the Friday sermon--an honor bestowed theologically only on the most venerated holy man in a city—is a clear indication of his clout within the clerical establishment. While Mr. Khamenei and his despotic cohorts have praised the election as "blessed" and divine, the "freest in the world," and the "death-knell of liberal democracy in the world," Rafsanjani declared it incurably flawed, and the source of a "crisis of confidence" in the nation. It is, he said, un-Islamic to "ignore people's votes," bluntly accusing the regime of stealing the election. He demanded the release of all political prisoners, saying they must be allowed to offer their services to the nation. Further evidence of the depth of the rift came a few days later, when Mr. Khatami, often criticized for his excessive caution called for a referendum to gauge the legitimacy of the current administration. In nearly every one of these declarations, these senior clerics have been taking aim at Khamenei,

once again reaffirming that his days as the infallible spiritual leader have mercifully ended. But his days in power and his ability to fight back have not yet ended.

On Monday, July 20, he fired back. His announcement was soon followed by his mouthpiece, the aggressively despotic daily paper called Kayhan. In reality on both occasions, Rafsanjani and Khatami and the rest of the opposition were threatened with a “storm” that will sink them both. Commanders of the IRGC have been busy making dangerous threats of their own but the opposition shows no sign of backing down. The fact that Mr. Karubi’s paper, Etemad Melli continues to be published, in spite of its open criticism of the election, and in spite of the fact that its talented editor, Mr. Gouchani continues to languish in jail, all show the complexity of the scene in Iran, and the extent of opposition’s clout in the corridors of power. Mr. Khamenei controls the military and the police but the opposition enjoys the support of a majority of the society and important parts of clerical power. Nearly all of Iran’s anemic private sector has also been squarely in the camp of the opposition. And thus the current purgatory.

With massive support for the opposition in the streets, and powerful presence in the ranks of the clergy, it is tempting to under-estimate the power of the despotic forces. We must remember that they still control and operate a highly sophisticated, well-trained, well-paid apparatus of oppression. Hitherto, the only structure of the regime that has remained ostensibly intact and immune to cracks has been the IRGC and the ranks of the Basij—the gangs-cum-militia that control every neighborhood and institution and whose military arms are the equivalents of the Brown-Shirts and used to attack demonstrators in recent weeks. Moreover, a few dedicated millions of people whose lives depends on the subsidies and remuneration they receive from the state also support these forces.

These forces of despotism enjoy some international support as well. Many greedy European companies like Siemens-Nokia, and even more crucially countries like China and Russia, both eager to find stronger foot-holds in Iran, both eager to confront and curtail the power of the US in the region, and finally India with its increasingly important role in many facets of Iran’s economy, have helped the regime fortify its oppressive apparatus at home. The same forces were responsible for delaying and deluding UN resolutions about the regime’s nuclear program. The fact that in the last Friday’s sermon, instead of orchestrated shouts of death to America there were spontaneous shouts of Death to Russia, and Death to China shows the extent of public resentment against regime’s international allies. A new member of this unholy alliance of authoritarian regimes is Venezuela. There are reports of ever-increasing ties of “friendship” and “anti-Imperialist” struggle between the Iranian despots and their Venezuelan counterpart.

Today, the ebb and flow of politics inside Iran and Ahmadinejad’s desperate search for countries that would recognize him as the new elected president have only further confounded the new American administration’s effort to engage Iran. The fact that the regime has aggressively pursued a nuclear policy that seems unmistakably bent on developing at least the technological capability of making and delivering a nuclear bomb further confounds this much-needed effort.

In recent years, there have been two tendencies, both in my view, flawed, that have dominated much of the debate about Iran in Washington. Regime apologists, sometimes appearing in the guise of scholars and experts, as well as a few companies eager to do business in Iran, have claimed the regime invulnerable and resolute, and the democratic forces at best dormant and bereft of resolve. Based on these convenient “facts” these apologists offered what they claimed was realism in US policy. The business of American policy is business, they said, and as the regime is here to stay, the US must make a “grand bargain” with it expeditiously. Forfeit any attempt at regime change, offer the regime all security guarantees its paranoid vision demands, and in return expect that the regime will keep a promise it will make not to develop the bomb.

The proposed policy has several flaws: it over-estimates the regime’s strength and overlooks its profound strategic vulnerabilities—today more pronounced and evident than ever before. Moreover, the policy counts on the regime keeping its words on forfeiting the development of a nuclear bomb. A regime that lies to its own people will lie to the world. More dangerous still is the fact that the Shiite clerics who rule Iran are hard believers in the theological concept of *Tagiye*—a salutary lie to save the faith or the faithful. According to Shiite doctrine, *Tagiye*, or lying to infidels is not only right but the duty of the faithful. The grand bargain, in other words, is a good deal for the clerical regime and a bad bargain not just for America but for Iranian democrats. Any hint that the US has forfeited or suspended its commitment to human rights and democracy in Iran is sure to weaken the forces of democracy in Iran. Iranian people have now shown more clearly than ever that while they do not want the kind of foreign dictated “regime change” that was for years the dream of some in Washington, they do want to change the regime to a democratic one. The grand bargain advocated by regime apologists betrays these forces, and they are, in the long run, the most reliable allies of America in Iran.

The second flawed policy was offered by those who exaggerated the weaknesses of the regime. Using understandable concerns of citizens in Israel and the West about a nuclear Iran, they advocated a policy of “regime change.” Should the effort fail—as it was doomed to fail from the beginning—proponents of the policy argued that military strikes against Iranian nuclear sites will push the already disgruntled Iranian population beyond the tipping point and into a massive uprising against the regime. Images of barbaric brutality by regime hooligans has been used by advocates of this policy as yet another proof that the clerical regime can not be trusted with a nuclear bomb. In reality, the best thing that can happen for these barbaric forces is that the US (or Israel) decide to attack Iran.

The clerical regime can certainly not be trusted with the bomb but the way to deny it is not through smart bombs but smart diplomacy and smart sanctions that curtail and contain the regime’s ability to engage in mischief around the world while sending a positive message of support to the democratic forces of Iran. This policy must have as its ultimate goal the idea of helping Iran become a democratic polity. It must have the humility to recognize that only the Iranian people themselves can create this democracy. In the short and medium term, US policy must engage in creative, critical and cautious engagement with Iran. A military strike only saves the day for Khamenei and his cohorts

and is sure to lead to the regime's open and aggressive search for the bomb. Based on all we know from Iranian history and human psychology, a military attack on Iran will invariably force the now disgruntled Iranians to rally around the flag, and eschew opposition to the regime.

The US as well as other democracies around the world can help the cause of democracy in Iran by withholding recognition to the Ahmadinejad government till at least the resolution of the current crisis. The next few weeks are in no way likely to change the course of Iran's nuclear program or put it in a new stage of readiness on its path to becoming at least a virtual nuclear state like Japan. The wait is as much symbolic as substantive. The Obama administration had earlier correctly understood and stipulated that in Iran, Khamenei is far more important in setting foreign and nuclear policy than any president. Ahmadinejad's highly compromised condition makes him an even less likely successful interlocutor. But if the triumvirate survives and succeeds in suppressing the opposition it will be the commanders of the IRGC who will set policy and not Khamenei. The much-needed policy of engagement with Iran can not begin until we know who rules Iran. The next few weeks are sure to give us strong hints about that.