

The Committee on the Present Danger

dedicated to winning the war on terrorism

A Committee on the Present Danger Policy Paper:

IRAN -- A NEW APPROACH

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei of Iran presents a fundamental threat to peace, for all signs point to his determination to develop nuclear weapons. Iran's people, on the other hand, are our allies. They want to free themselves from Khamenei's oppression and they want Iran to join the community of prosperous, peaceful democracies.

The recent agreement Iran made with France, Germany and Britain to temporarily halt uranium enrichment, while it may slow down its overall program, will do so only briefly. What is needed is a permanent cessation of Iran's uranium enrichment activities (unless it can be proven the program is for peaceful purposes only), including inspection of recently-revealed secret nuclear facilities, along with those sites already agreed upon.

If there were in place an international clearing house and monitoring system for using existing enriched uranium for peaceful purposes only, countries seeking it for such purposes would not have to develop their own enrichment capacity. In the absence of such a system, it must be made clear to Iran that the alternative to a permanent agreement to suspend its enrichment activities will be stiff economic sanctions-- something Iran does not want. A number of strategies can be put in place quickly to build pressure to both reduce the threat and to promote democratic change in Iran.

Threat and Opportunity

The centrality of the threat posed by Iran is clear. In addition to its peace-threatening nuclear program, Iran under Khamenei, continues to be the world's foremost state supporter of terrorism, offering financial and logistical support to both Shi'a and Sunni terrorist organizations, including Hizballah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Elements of al-Qaida and Ansar al-Islam transit through Iran and find safe haven there. Through these groups Khamenei destabilizes the region, prevents the emergence of an independent and democratic Lebanon and tries to stymie any movement toward peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Khamenei supports Moqtada al-Sadr and others in Iraq who want it to become another theocratic dictatorship under Iranian tutelage. He is seeking regional hegemony, both ideologically and militarily. His growing oil wealth increases his capacity for wreaking havoc on his own people and the region.

The opportunity is equally clear. The votes of the Iranian people in the elections of 1997 and 2001, and in repeated public demonstrations from 1999 to the present, have been widely interpreted as strong expressions of support for democracy and change. Numerous leading religious and reformist figures have spoken against Khamenei's rule and his unwillingness to establish normal relations with the United States. The repression, failed economic policies and corruption of the Khamenei regime have led to deep alienation.

The geostrategic situation increasingly favors the forces of democracy around and inside Iran. Should progress continue toward a stable, democratic Afghanistan and Iraq, and with reform moving ahead elsewhere in the region, Khamenei's dictatorship becomes an increasingly isolated and dangerous anachronism. A new and democratic government in Iran would be a major contribution toward transformation of the region from its present backwardness and strife to a one of growing peace, prosperity and freedom.

Given the scale of the threat and the promise of the opportunity, Iran must move to the top of America's foreign policy agenda for the next four years. We need a fresh approach that appeals to, encourages and empowers the Iranian people. We need to rally our allies around a strategy that takes into account their commitment to traditional diplomacy, while putting all of us together on the offensive vis-à-vis Khamenei. We need to relearn the lessons of what has worked, not just in negotiating with the Soviet Union through a position of strength (while simultaneously opening up eastern and central Europe and supporting the forces of democracy), but also in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in countries from Chile to Indonesia.

Opening up dictatorships is key to helping the forces of change. We were on the ground with an embassy and support programs for Solidarity in Poland, which played a central role in the nonviolent transition to democracy. Nonviolent movements based on alliances between students, workers and intellectuals, leading to massive demonstrations and general strikes, have worked in dozens of countries in the past three decades; they worked in Iran itself. The reawakening of Iran's tradition of student activism, a predominant force in the 1978-79 overthrow of the Shah, is not lost on Khamenei and should not be lost on us.

Elements of a new American policy:

The administration should announce clearly a new approach to U.S. policy and be prepared to pursue it in a sustained manner. The highest profile announcement would be a speech by the President. The stated purpose of the announcement would be a pledge by the United States to reconnect with the Iranian people, to help the vast majority of Iranians who want democracy to achieve it and thereby join the community of democratic nations, to assure their security in return for not acquiring nuclear weapons and to help develop their economy. Recognizing that the major barrier to Iranians seizing their freedom is their current mood of pessimism and isolation, the

President's announcement would be voicing our confidence in their ability to succeed and our determination to assist them.

We should announce our willingness to reopen our embassy in Tehran. At the same time, one of our highest-ranking officials should be designated as the key person in our new policy toward Iran. An example of such a person is the State Department's Counselor. The Counselor must be prepared to assert regularly his or her strong human rights advocacy and commitment to democracy for Iran. While it is unlikely that Khamenei would move ahead rapidly (it is well to remember that his predecessor closed our embassy 25 years ago because of his fear of the "Great Satan's" influence on Iranians, and Khamenei continues to limit contact with the United States), we will have demonstrated that we are exhausting all remedies. The Counselor would be the point person for our new policy and Iran warrants the nearly-full-time attention of such a senior official.

There is an extensive agenda with or without the early opening of an embassy. The Counselor can work to generate support from our allies, speak frequently with the Iranian people via radio/tv/internet and meet directly with Iranians wherever possible. He or she should concentrate on direct outreach to the Iranian people rather than solely engaging with Iranian government officials. The Counselor should understand that engagement with officials without engagement with ordinary Iranians will be interpreted by the Iranian people as abandonment of democracy. Discussion with Iranian officials should be limited to those with sufficient power to make decisions--such as those in the Office of the Supreme Leader--rather than with ordinary diplomats in the Foreign Ministry.

Nuclear Weapons. President Bush has voiced skepticism about Iran's suspension of its nuclear enrichment program (a program which could lead to the creation of weapons). He has emphasized the need for third-party verification of all related sites in Iran. While we should work carefully and multilaterally in this regard, any verification failure should lead immediately to taking the matter to the United Nation Security Council for the imposition of sanctions. Khamenei should also understand that if he does not comply with legitimate international requirements to keep his nuclear weapons development program suspended, we and others reserve the right to take out or cripple his nuclear capabilities.

The case of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi is instructive. Through an interplay of allied strength and diplomacy he became persuaded to give up his stealth program to produce weapons of mass destruction. The lesson here is that dictators who feel sufficiently threatened can be persuaded to give up their WMD ambitions. We can accept no less in the case of an even more dangerous Khamenei. The window of opportunity will not remain open indefinitely. Some say it is already too late to stop Khamenei's nuclear ambition and that we will just have to live with it. We must make clear that we will not accept Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon, and we must be willing to reinforce that position.

Supporting Iranian Democrats and Dissidents. Ultimately, it is Iranians themselves who will make the breakthrough to democracy and remove Khamenei from power. We need to make clear that they are our partners in a new dialogue and that even as we meet with representatives of the Khamenei regime, we consider these to be illegitimate.

There are many time-tested ways in which we can help, particularly with younger Iranians and women as the major agents of change. Cultural, academic, and professional exchanges and programs must form an integral part of our efforts to assist Iranians in the democratization of their country. Visiting scholars--even tourists--have considerable freedom of movement and association. Young activists from democratic countries could also enter Iran as tourists to meet with their Iranian counterparts and to join in demonstrations. We should authorize American NGOs to operate within Iran. We should also tie U.S. visas for Iranians to those that Iran grants to Americans. For example, if Iran refuses to allow, say, American student groups or scholars to visit their country, then we should bar a number of Iranian officials, their family members and business partners from ours.

It is also important to get young Iranian activists abroad for short seminars with counterparts who have been successful in organizing civic campaigns in Serbia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Chile and elsewhere. (These activists should be chosen by U.S. officials, not by Iranian institutions.) Embassies of the democracies can give support in many ways: attendance at trials, joint petitions for release of political prisoners, financial assistance to prisoners' families and democratic groups, training, witnessing and even participating in demonstrations. Iran should receive the highest priority in funding from our public and private democracy/human rights organizations. Congress should consider an Iran Freedom Act to generate adequate resources for relevant NGOs.

Undermining pillars of support. To remain in power, Khamenei relies upon his security services. In 1978-79 the Shah's largely peasant-based army disintegrated in the face of massive street demonstrations. The Shah's hated secret police, SAVAK, was overwhelmed.

Faced with demonstrations in 2002, Khamenei was unsure the army would obey his orders and resorted to using hired paramilitary thugs. The United States has opportunities to develop relations with the military and various services in Iran and should seek to do so. Our forces in the region, the CIA, FBI, Drug Enforcement Agency and others have issues to work on, ranging from cross-border threats to terrorism to drugs. One objective in these relationships should be to make clear that those there who cooperate in the transition to democracy can thrive on the other side (as many others in former dictatorships have done), but those who persist in committing crimes against the Iranian people or others will be prosecuted. We should specifically call for the eradication of the Islamic Guard Corps and the *Basij*, for reform or elimination of the Ministry of Information and an investigation into the government's support for vigilante groups such as Ansar al-Hizballah.

Smart sanctions. As Khamenei and his regime are the problem and the Iranian people our natural allies, we should develop sanctions that target the Supreme Leader and his close circle of support, so that the sanctions are not seen by the people as harmful to them.

In April 1997 a German court implicated Iran's leaders in the assassination of their opponents in Berlin. This ruling had an impact on Iranian opinion, contributing to the big vote for Khatami that year, perceived as a reformer. Deftly making it known that a case is being marshaled against Khamenei would create good leverage. U.S. Government agencies, working closely with human rights organizations, could begin gathering evidence. Then, we could seek the cooperation of like-minded governments, leading toward creation of an international tribunal to try Khamenei.

Crimes for which evidence could be gathered include financing and facilitating terrorists, corruption, the torture and murder of Khamenei's opponents at home and abroad and development of weapons of mass destruction in violation of the Non-proliferation Treaty and other accords. We have precedent for a special tribunal gathering evidence against and eventually indicting a leader still in office in the case of Liberia's President Charles Taylor and the UN-approved Sierra Leone tribunal. In Taylor's case, having an Interpol arrest warrant out against him has had a significant impact in delegitimizing and undermining him.

Other "smart" sanctions also can be developed. Iran's Revolutionary Foundations (*bunyards*) control 35 percent of Iran's import-export business and are directly controlled by Khamenei. The Iranian people are well aware that despite protestations of moral leadership, Khamenei and certain *mullahs* and their supporters have grown rich and corrupt. The United States and other nations are becoming more expert at identifying the economic crimes and assets of dictators and their supporters. We should undertake a major effort to identify those companies and accounts associated with Khamenei and his entourage and develop sanctions targeting them. We should use our existing sanctions as rewards for progress on specific agenda items of concern to us, such as human rights, terrorism, nuclear weapons and regional peace.

Television, radio and internet. The U.S. Government's Farsi-language Radio Farda ("Tomorrow") and several hours weekly of VOA television are a beginning, but not enough if we are going to effectively communicate directly with the Iranian people. A number of private U.S.-based Iranian satellite television stations exist, but they are underfunded and thus unable to achieve their real potential. A budget equal to that of Radio Farda and VOA television should be made available to them. At least \$10 million annually should be appropriated to assist independent television, radio and internet communications with the Iranian people.

Dialogue with Khamenei about his return to the mosque. Dictators are acutely conscious of their vulnerability, even their mortality. A dialogue with them about a way to exit peacefully from political power, combined with credible indications of the

alternatives (jail or hanging), can play an important role. Who could conduct such a dialogue with Khamenei?

President Khatami has the legal right to hold such a dialogue, but he has been weak to date. Iranians and their democratic friends should be looking for such a person or group. Shi'a clerics with high religious standing in both Iran and Iraq argue that *mullahs* do damage to their own influence and prestige when they try to run the everyday secular affairs of the state. We should encourage the *Houzeh* (the traditional Shi'a religious establishment) to reinforce the position that, short of the return of the Hidden Imam, clerical rule is by nature corrupt and detrimental to the status of religion in society. Perhaps they could join together to approach Khamenei--initially in private--to urge that he cede secular power to those elected by the people, and to make clear that they will go public with this demand if he resists.

Dialogue with the Iranian government. We should state our willingness to meet with Iranian officials to discuss issues of concern to us, such as human rights, terrorism, nuclear weapons, regional stability. We should also reiterate that trade and investment relations can move forward (and sanctions removed) as progress is made in these areas.

Conclusion

For far too long an academic debate over engagement vs. containment, dialogue vs. regime change has dominated and weakened America's approach to Iran. Some argue that "Iran is not on the verge of another revolution" and we should just engage in a dialogue. Others argue that a dialogue will strengthen and perpetuate the regime, and we should try to bring it down through isolation, arming a resistance inside the country and maybe eventually carrying out another Iraq-style invasion. The Committee on the Present Danger believes that we need a new approach, one based on a sober recognition of the threat Khamenei presents, but also an appreciation of our new strengths and the opportunity before us. We recommend a peaceful but forceful strategy to engage with the Iranian people to remove the threat and establish the strong relationship which is in both nations' and the region's interests.

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