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Iran, Regime Change or Behavior Change: A false choice

By Reza Pahlavi of Iran

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests good afternoon.

Allow me to express my gratitude for the invitation to be with you today. To many of you whom I know personally, I extend my admiration and respect for the great work you have done over the years. To those I meet for the first time, thank you for letting me have the privilege of getting to know you.

The Hudson Institute's proud tradition of service to world peace includes the great work of those, like Herman Kahn, who dared to "think the unthinkable." You can imagine the depth of my sorrow that today, the "unthinkable" concerns my homeland.

The latest Presidential National Security Directive names the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest threat to international peace, security and stability. That is principally because permitting the foremost state-sponsor of terrorism to acquire nuclear weapons is unthinkable.

What has changed from Herman Kahn's era is that mutual assured destruction (MAD) worked against a rival that defined its interests in this material world. Messrs. Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and many of their cohorts do not.

How can assured destruction deter those who glorify self-destruction and call it martyrdom? Just as suicide bombing has changed domestic security policies, dealing with the nuclearization of this new kind of "other-worldly" state requires a different approach in international relations. Far from acting to avoid assured destruction, they invite it with tireless exaltation of *martyrdom!* Which brings us to the question, what could be done?

The current debate on Iran seems to have reduced the question to a choice between regime change and behavior change. That is a false choice. It is also a formulation preferred by those who do not mind loading the dice in favor of longer life for Iran's clerical regime. This is because short memories equate regime change with the use of force in Iraq. The unique mistakes in Iraq, however, should not sully regime change, which wasn't such a bad phrase during the Cold War era, just two decades ago:

President Reagan knew that he would not get behavior change from the Soviet regime unless he seemed serious about changing it. The actual change was a happy

byproduct, which spelled the end of the Marxist mystique. East-European youth backpacked their way to the West to tell fellow students about the wide chasm between the deceptive promise of Marxism and its wretched reality. Long lines to take Marxist courses disappeared in Universities, from Buenos Aires to Paris.

Similarly, I am convinced once the people bring down the clerical regime, with Iranian journalists, intellectuals and students free to travel, they will have the same shattering impact on the appeal of Islamist theocracy throughout the Moslem world.

Ah, but Russia was more modern than the Middle East, riper for democracy – some say. They are perhaps unaware that Iran had a democratic “Constitutional Revolution,” fully 100 years ago, when Russia was still Czarist. They would be much surprised to learn that, in 1914, the Times of London wrote that British Parliamentarians would be well served to emulate democratic practices from their counterparts, in Iran’s *Majles* (parliament)!

They know even less about the differences between Iran, which was never colonized, and Iraq, whose constituent parts were governed separately under Ottoman rule, which decapitated its independent political institutions and postponed our Iraqi brethren’s opportunity to develop a sense of nationhood.

Still, it was easier to talk favorably about regime change in 2004 or 2005, when Iraqis were celebrating free elections and the Cedar Revolution was gaining steam in Lebanon. That is when Tehran’s theocrats and Syria’s Assad sensed the danger and set out to kill the hope for democracy in the region. They exploited religious and ethnic divisions to create a quagmire as a no-trespass sign to the rest of the world: Shelve any plans for democracy in the region, from the subcontinent to the Mediterranean, and from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf – read the sign.

The Baker-Hamilton Report is a tacit acceptance of that no-trespass sign. Unfortunately, the report does not indicate how one can reach an agreement with the Islamic Republic, whose primary purpose is to humiliate the US in the theater of the Moslem world. There is method to their madness: The theocracy’s anachronistic life is mortgaged on proving to regional governments, and non-governmental forces, that those who oppose America will defeat those who cooperate with her.

The State Department’s policy on Iran relies on diplomatic isolation and economic pressure. It is more hard-nosed than Baker-Hamilton, but it still suffers from the flaws of *realpolitik* when facing an irrational actor. Isolation? What isolation, demands President Ahmadinejad!

The day he was squaring off against President Bush at the UN General Assembly, last fall, 118 out of the 192 nations present, more than 60%, were with him. He had just come from Cuba, where he had secured the support of the non-aligned movement. He had been received like a rock star by radical students in Indonesia, applauded by Castro in Cuba, and bear-hugged by Chavez in Venezuela.

Those in Foggy Bottom who think they can make Ahmadinejad feel isolated simply cannot see the world through his eyes. Even if he felt isolated, it is doubtful he would change his behavior. Even the threat of force is not enough to sway someone whose deepest beliefs welcome Armageddon – to expedite the return of the twelfth Imam, his messiah!

As for economic pressures, recent history should have convinced us that they are not enough to change the behavior of a regime that does not care about the welfare of its people. In more than two years of negotiations, Iran's major European trade partners, Germany, France and Britain played with numerous combinations of economic threats and incentives, before they threw in the towel. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported Iran to the UN Security Council shortly thereafter.

Backed by the Russians and the Chinese, last June the US joined the Europeans to offer a very generous incentive package, should the regime suspend enrichment of uranium. Two deadlines came and passed, with the Islamic Republic dancing around the proposal, but not addressing its substance. Just as Presidents Bush, Putin and Chirac, Prime Minister Blair, and Chancellor Merkel were about to discuss what to do, Hizbullah crossed the Israeli border and took two hostages. Thus, the war precipitated by the Islamic Republic's client washed discussions of pressuring Iran off the agenda at the St. Petersburg G8 Summit, late July of last year.

It should not come as a surprise any longer that, three more deadlines and three UN Security Council resolutions later, we are back at the same old dance; except it has become more deadly, considering the regime's plan for three thousand centrifuges and new restrictions placed on international inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities; begging the question: To what level could unilateral US sanctions be expanded to, or what other UN sanctions could be acceptable to Russia and China?

In short, US foreign policy and international pressure are reaching their limit, while the government whose head denies the Holocaust and wants an entire nation wiped off the map, is inching ever closer to the bomb!

Having removed the Taliban and Saddam - two walls of Iran's containment - having approached the limits of diplomatic and economic pressures, many discussions of US options now teeter between war and surrender. Surrender, by the way, has a fascinating new name: Engage and Deter! We engaged China to get out of Vietnam, why can't we do the same with Iran to exit Iraq? That was the question put to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by a Council of Foreign Relations fellow, who seemed to put some Senators in deep thought.

We deterred the Soviet Union, why can't we deter Iran, is more music to the ears of the Islamic Republic, playing in Washington these days. Perhaps, it is the current mood of desperation on Iraq, but few policymakers seem to peel these thin disguises of surrender and see through the false parallels and specious arguments:

A cursory review of history will demonstrate that Henry Kissinger's deal with China was possible because the latter saw the Soviets as the principal threat to her security. He

knew how real that threat was when Leonid Brezhnev asked President Nixon to give him a free hand with China and stay out of a potential Sino-Soviet nuclear conflict. There is today, no such parallel with the Islamic Republic, which does not see a third party as the principal threat, let alone seeing the US as a possible savior!

In this new disguise for surrender, mention of deterrence is even less valid, but requires more insight to expose. During the cold war, nuclear deterrence gave the West an advantage: the Warsaw Pact's conventional forces were quantitatively superior and nuclear arms acted as an equalizer in the European theater.

In the Persian Gulf today, it is the US that has overwhelming conventional superiority. Should the Islamic Republic get the bomb, it will equalize that superiority and deter a high-intensity conventional attack. The nuclear shield will, thus, open the hands of the Islamic Republic to expand low intensity violence -- a.k.a. terrorism -- in furtherance of its constitutional mission of exporting Islamic Revolution. Hamas, Hizbullah, the Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigade and the like will then look ten feet taller than their intimidated moderate rivals.

As one witness after another comforts Congressional leaders that the Islamic Republic can be deterred, I do not hear the riposte that even their best scenario means unshackling terrorism, let alone their worst! Nor does the administration seem to be able to lead Congress away from such harmful and deceptive advice, because it is ill-equipped to deal with unconventional states.

Washington's foreign policy is shaped by the State Department that understands diplomacy and the Defense Department that understands war. Both institutions are legacies of the state-centric view of the world which was consistent with the reality of international politics right after World War II – but not today, not after the Cold War.

The Departments of State and Defense were not structured to help “velvet” revolutions, which have been the most significant patterns of positive change in the world since the Cold War. The problem is that the US does not have a third foreign policy department; one that understands, and can deal, with the peoples of the transitional world, not just their failed states.

Is it all lost then? Are we back to war or surrender? Far from it! We haven't focused on the greatest ally of the Free World in the Moslem World: the people of Iran. Three Iranian social groups, the women, youth and ethnic groups, as well as four professional and working groups, educators, lawyers, journalists and industrial labor, have been at the forefront of protests against and defiance of the Islamic Republic. Two of the top three Iranian cities, Tabriz and Mashhad, as well as other major cities, such as Sanandaj, have been out of government control, for days at a time.

The principal reason why the vast majority of Iranians who want to reclaim peace and prosperity have not succeeded against the Islamic Republic is because they are prevented from communicating – with each other, and with the free world.

Inside Iran, the government controls mass media with an iron fist. Even “Bloggers” with a limited audience are arrested, let alone published journalists – and there are more of them in jail than anywhere in the world.

A must have for Iran’s pro-democracy movement is media that can connect Iranian activists inside Iran with each other. As I have mentioned before, there are a thousand circles of protest in Iran, but no nationwide medium to connect them. Since the government will not tolerate such a medium inside Iran, it has to be done from outside.

As some of you may know, there are a few under-funded amateur-video type satellite television stations, beaming into Iran from the West. But they cannot even afford decent old movies, let alone produce meaningful programming.

Then there is the Voice of America Radio and Television, and a forthcoming TV channel by the BBC. Although much improved, their governmental mission statements and cautious bureaucracies have not, and are not likely to, make a serious impact in Iran.

What is needed is engaging programming that builds audience share by truly reflecting the needs, grievances and resistance of Iranian women, youth, ethnic groups and the professional groups. Given needed resources, modern technology makes it quite possible to have two-way communication between the politically active audience inside Iran and a medium outside which can connect them to each other. That is what it takes to mobilize the Iranian people – without whom, we are back to war or surrender.

I never miss a chance to reject military action against my homeland.

I am against war. I hope you are too, and I can not believe that you would be for surrender. Thus, we are left with regime change vs. behavior change. And as indicated earlier, that is a false choice. So what is the right choice?

Like most totalitarian leaders, Iran’s Supreme Islamist leader wakes up every morning wondering if the morale and ideological glue of his security forces will hold. To strengthen their spine, he feels he has to take tough, uncompromising stands against his ideological adversaries – liberal democracies in general, and the United States and Israel in particular.

The reckless self-righteousness of his “other-worldly” ideology will continue this course, until a final collision. This behavior will not change unless he wakes up one morning with an even greater fear: seeing the Iranian people joining hands and rising up against his theocratic tyranny.

Unlike forgetful analysts in the West, he knows the Iranian people have changed their regimes many times before, when they had far less reasons to do so. He watches carefully for the signs of history repeating itself. Once he sees those signs, and only then, will he change his behavior.

That is why idealism and realism, behavior change and regime change do not require different policies but the same: empowering the Iranian people.

This is my political mission in life. I ask for your support, and thank you sincerely for sharing some of your valuable time with me.