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November 2, 2009

Iran: With Whom to Engage?



By Reza Pahlavi

Last week, I had the opportunity to address over forty members of the United States Congress with the goal to encourage their recognition of the importance of engaging the Iranian people and their ongoing struggle for human rights and democracy.

I began my remarks by asking, "If the U.S. is to continue to assert engagement as the path forward in the case of Iran, whom precisely should the engagement be with?"

The answer: the "Green Movement" of the Iranian people.

If the U.S. supports the Iranian people in their struggle for democracy -- for human rights and liberties -- it will empower their movement, catalyzing their success. And in so doing, the West will find its solution to nuclear proliferation: democracy itself. It is only in a democratic Iran where the international community will find a trustworthy, transparent and accountable counterpart.

I am and have always been opposed to any military action against my homeland. But it is also clear that any diplomatic efforts deprived of appropriate pressure points would be toothless, thus incapable of producing the desired results. In hopes of providing U.S. lawmakers with tangible guidance on Iran, I offered a three-pronged combination of measures that offers the best prospects for long-term stability: (1) a more vociferous support for the Green Movement's legitimate calls for human rights and democracy; (2) targeted sanctions against the individual financial power of the regime's leadership; and (3) serious commitment, support and work to increase communications into Iran, out of Iran, and within Iran.

Similar to my discussions with members of the French National Assembly, the British House of Commons and the European Parliament, I detailed this strategy by urging the Members of the U.S. Congress to embrace their greatest ally against nuclear proliferation: the Iranian people. The Iranian people have loudly and unequivocally vocalized their demands for a democratic system of government, which by definition will be transparent, responsible and accountable. Solidarity from world leaders sustains the momentum they need in their campaign for the establishment of freedom and democracy at home, and peace and stability in the region. I cannot imagine any achievable sanctions that could create pressures commensurate with what the people of Iran have already demonstrated.

I, along with most Iranians, was quite disheartened to learn that earlier this month, the U.S. State Department had denied all funding to a human rights center, as well as an online Farsi-English journal of democracy, both of which focused on Iran.

It is simply counterintuitive for America -- at this critical moment in Iran's history -- to deflate, through such actions, the hopes and aspirations of the Iranian people. It is exactly what the clerical regime wants: a confidence builder in its usage of an iron fist against a citizenry that has so courageously withstood the blows of wielding clubs, chains and untold rape and torture.

As Iranian democracy activists remind us, "There is a reason protesters hold signs written in English on the streets in Iran. They are not just practicing their language skills!"

As I confer with international opinion and policy makers, I regularly make the emphasis, as I did with members of the U.S. Congress, on the importance of targeted personalized sanctions against the regime's leadership and individual private financial fiefdoms, rather than the Iranian people. The imposition of smart sanctions that specifically target the assets of key decision makers, and the means of the Revolutionary Guards to oppress the people, can prove effective. The critical goal, however, must be to weaken the financial power of the oppressive forces inside Iran. Clearly, if the West is to enforce new sanctions, those sanctions must be intrinsically tied to the Green Movement's outcry for freedom.

As with so many fronts in this modern-era, at the end, it is all about communications. I encourage investment in technologies that increase communication with the Iranian people. America in particular needs to increase the available mediums of dialogue with the Iranian people by strengthening the ability of the Iranian people to access news and information and to overcome the electronic censorship and monitoring efforts of the Iranian regime.

This renewed dialogue would allow the world to demonstrate its solidarity with the democracy-seeking Iranian people. It would also improve the accuracy of the information received from Iran. But perhaps most importantly, improving these technologies would allow the Green Movement within Iran to communicate, organize and mobilize much more efficiently.

Finally, I regularly remind my audiences that history has taught us that the democratic process must come to fruition as a result of an internal discourse. In the meantime, the international community must stand in solidarity with the people of Iran through a palpable commitment to their struggle.

By supporting the Iranian Green Movement and the people's legitimate quest for human rights and democracy; sanctioning the financial strength of Iran's leadership; and improving communications technologies, we shall provide a solution that not only works for the free world, but also for my compatriots, and even perhaps the region at large.

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