

STAND BY ME

LESSONS ON HOW TO ENGAGE IRAN

BY PROFESSOR FIROOZEH KASHANI-SABET



Gateway to Iran: The Azadi (translated Freedom) Tower in Tehran is named for the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

ISTOCKPHOTO / JEROEN PEYS

The summer of 2009 brought unanticipated turmoil to Iran. For weeks, women and men took to the streets to challenge the June 12 elections, giving rise to the most significant uprising in the country since 1979. They unleashed a “Twitter” revolution and showed the world that turbans and veils can mask savvy rebels capable of outsmarting even the most cunning censors in the Islamic Republic.

The protestors heard calls for solidarity from unexpected quarters. Joan Baez recorded a Persian version of “We Shall Overcome,” and Jon Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora partnered with Iranian singer Andy to record a Persian-English rendition of the classic tune “Stand by Me.”

Now that the initial protests have ended, ordinary Iranians have hardly put their disenchantment behind them. How can they? Journalists disappear

without just cause. Others are detained and taken to the notorious Evin prison for questioning and torture.

What role, if any, should the United States play? History can offer some signposts. To make sense of contemporary Iranian politics, American policy-makers must recognize that three themes have animated modern Iranian history: freedom, frontiers and foreign intervention.

FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

In 1906, Iran inaugurated its first parliament. Unfortunately, this first experiment with democracy came to a halt in 1911, when a Russian invasion rang the death knell for constitutional rule.

During the next round of parliamentary politics, Muhammad Musaddiq, the popularly elected (1951) prime minister, led a campaign to nationalize Iranian oil. His status swelled to heroic proportions, and *Time* magazine grudgingly named this “strange old wizard who lives in a mountainous land” its Man of the Year.

Then came the coup of 1953. The CIA ousted Musaddiq, propped up the Shah’s puppet regime and turned a blind eye to human rights abuses. Within days, all had changed. Musaddiq was placed under house arrest, while the Shah organized his CIA-trained secret police, the SAVAK, and paid lip service to the parliament.

In 1964, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a little-known religious figure, delivered an incendiary speech from his pulpit, castigating the Persian parliament for granting diplomatic immunity to the United States. His sermon struck a chord with critics of the regime. In response, the Shah silenced Khomeini by sending him to Iraq,

where he hoped the cleric would remain immured behind the gilded exteriors of the Shi'i shrines.

In 1979, Iranians spoke out against the impact of Western imperialism, directing their anger largely against the United States. But many soon felt betrayed by the Islamic Revolution as they watched their civil liberties slip away. Again, the public failed to put in place a government accountable to the people. Despite this history of authoritarianism, Iranians have not renounced their pursuit of freedom. Nor should they.

FRONTIER SECURITY

Democracy in Iran is impossible without some measure of frontier security. Home to various ethnic groups, Iran has confronted many separatist movements in its modern history. The instability of frontier life creates real security threats. This point was most recently demonstrated in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, an internecine conflict that cost many lives and changed little. A nuclear Pakistan to the east has also heightened instability in the borderlands. Pakistan's nuclear test site in 1998 was the Baluchistan desert where separatist movements brought the region under the scrutiny of Iran's central government.

That the U.S. military has virtually surrounded Iran poses a formidable threat that cannot be underestimated. Whatever Iranians may think about President Ahmadinejad, the public overwhelmingly supports his push for nuclear energy. For many, it is a national right. This is not to suggest that Iranians support the acquisition of nuclear energy so that Iran can launch nuclear war against its neighbors. On the contrary, most are weary of war, but Iranians do not wish to feel technologically impotent,

especially when nearby countries such as Russia, India, Pakistan and Israel all have nuclear weapons.

Although Iran has tried to stabilize relations with neighbors, it cannot eliminate disturbances that have come to characterize frontier life. The presence of American troops along Iran's borders complicates that puzzle. Rumors of an impending Israeli (or U.S.-Israeli) attack may seem far-fetched to some, but they make others edgy.

COSTS OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION

Americans may find it surprising to learn that they were a source of inspiration for Iranians at the turn of the last century. Before President Barack Obama, another American statesman had already won Persian hearts. In 1905, a year before Iran's tumultuous constitutional revolution, a Persian newspaper serialized a biography of George Washington. Described as a brave "nationalist" who had strived for his country's freedom, Washington became a political paragon for Iranian constitutionalists.

Back then, as today, many Americans sympathized with the political struggles of ordinary Iranians. In fact, the American hired at that time to become Iran's treasurer general, Morgan Shuster, wrote a book, aptly titled *The*

Strangling of Persia, about the harms of foreign intervention in Iranian affairs. Almost a century has passed since Shuster's mission. What can be gleaned from this troubled history?

While orchestrating regime change—even if desirable—would be problematic in the long term, American diplomats can instead support the Green Movement and

Iran's opposition leaders, given that many are regime insiders themselves. Despite their ideological differences, Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami and Mousavi are all sons of the revolution. They can prove effective allies in putting pressure on President Ahmadinejad to meet the demands of the Iranian people.

Faced with economic stagnation, security threats and wide-scale domestic unrest, the government has its hands full. Ahmadinejad's position remains weak even after the arrest of key dissident intellectuals. What's worse, he needs the acquiescence of the senior politicians, some of whom have worked hard to oust him from office.

The best way for the United States to express solidarity with the Iranian people is through an embrace of Persian democracy. As Shuster recognized more than a century earlier, "The Persian people gave to the world an exhibition of temperance, of moderation, of stern self-restraint the like of which probably no other civilized country could show under similar trying circumstances." Shuster's words could not hold more true today. ♦

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