

DEALING WITH IRAN
TIME FOR A "MIDDLE WAY" BETWEEN
CONFRONTATION AND CONCILIATION

GENEIVE ABDO

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2010, the insideIRAN project at The Century Foundation and the National Security Network convened the first meeting of what will be a twelve- to eighteen-month Iran–U.S. Advisory Group, bringing together Iranian activists with close ties to Iran’s opposition, including the Green Movement, with European and American current and retired officials and diplomats.

The advisory group’s discussions highlighted a number of insights about Iran today that often are lost in public discussion; they also highlighted the role that communications technology can play in enabling civil society and the Green Movement to work effectively, and in preventing the Iranian government from using such technology to censor and control civil society:

- The Iranian opposition has evolved into a diverse civil society movement, which is neither on the cusp of taking over the Iranian state nor poised to crumble away and disappear.
- Unlike dissident movements of as recently as ten years ago, today’s opposition has begun to abandon the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Revolution, with a significant minority believing that Islamic governance is no longer desirable—as a result, denying the regime its revolutionary legitimacy and shattering the aura sanctity that had surrounded Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.
- Public criticism of Khamenei by the clerical establishment, and deep divisions within it, are profound concerns for the regime.
- The increasing militarization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) toward the Iranian population and the growing role the IRGC plays in Iranian governance have profound consequences for the outside world’s ability to influence Iran.

- U.S. and Western policy toward Iran should pursue a multi-track approach—keeping the door open to engagement and highlighting the regime’s atrocious human rights record—rather than view policy options as a stark choice between a military attack or acquiescence to a repressive regime.
- Free speech in Iran is severely limited and the media is predominantly state-controlled. As a result, recent years have seen the Internet become a primary source of information for millions of Iranians. But as civilian Internet use has grown, the regime’s technology at blocking access to the Internet has become more sophisticated.
- Despite differences among various leaders within the opposition over what type of assistance is needed from U.S. and Western governments, most agree that some form of support is vital to advance the Green Movement, which eventually could bring a modicum of political reform to the system.

Iranian members of the advisory group developed a set of recommendations specifically addressing communications technology and how the U.S. and Western governments can foster connectivity and discourage government surveillance and repression. The specific measures recommended by the advisory group include:

- Increase Iranian public access to the Internet by sanctioning companies that assist the Iranian government in Internet filtering, surveillance, and eavesdropping.
- Create a secure e-mail service that can be accessed by activists to use inside Iran. There is no major secure free e-mail in Iran.
- Facilitate the provision of high-speed Internet via satellite. The regime deliberately has slowed the Internet to reduce the speed in which Iranians can read and communicate via the Internet.

- Dedicate a hardened satellite to host Iranian television and radio channels. This would enable Western news services, such as BBC Persian and Voice of America, to escape the Islamic Republic's routine jamming efforts. This is one of the most important measures that can be undertaken.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of dealing with Iran is among the most important and difficult foreign policy issues confronting President Barack Obama and his administration. In the aftermath of demonstrations in Iran the past summer, the balance of power within the state has shifted. Now, not only are Iran's hardliners the dominant force, but they have militarized the state and society through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which could prolong the regime's survival for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the opposition movement has become more broad-based, reaching across generational divides and socio-economic classes; it is more brazen than at any time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The opposition's new-found momentum has created a fluid situation, and both sides seem determined that the struggle will continue.

Instability at home has meant that Iran virtually no longer maintains a foreign policy agenda. The regime's refusal to engage diplomatically with the United States is due as much to the fissures within the regime as it is to the state's preoccupation with its domestic crisis. While the hardliners' takeover of the state presents a greater challenge for the United States to engage Iran in diplomatic negotiations, the political crisis also presents an opportunity for the Obama administration—one that has gained little attention in Washington. This opportunity lies in empowering the opposition movement, which includes but is not restricted to the Green Movement.

With this opportunity in mind, the Iran-U.S. Advisory Group, which is being lead by the insideIRAN project at The Century Foundation and the National Security Network, held its first meeting on February 19, 2010. The advisory group consists of Iranian activists with ties to the opposition, and European, American, and North American officials and diplomats. The advisory group aims to improve the understanding of the political crisis inside Iran, particularly the state of the regime and the opposition, and focus attention on policy steps that will be most effective in helping Iranians reform the political

system without empowering the regime against either its own people or other nations.

IRAN'S POLITICAL CRISIS THE OPPOSITION AND THE HARDLINERS

Iranian members of the advisory group noted that opposition protests have become an ever-present force in Iranian politics, despite variance in their size and intensity. Indeed, the street protests on February 11, the date that marks the thirty-first anniversary of the Islamic revolution, were a disappointment for the opposition; Iranians were barred from demonstrating by the heaviest state security presence in recent memory. The numbers of demonstrators that day paled in comparison with previous protests, when tens of thousands, if not millions, came out into the streets. Nevertheless, this particularly bad showing for the opposition is a momentary setback in the longer term: the opposition is comprised of a diverse range of Iranian activists and should be viewed in the larger context as a civil society movement. What began as a predominantly urban, middle-class movement with a central grievance of a rigged election has evolved into a movement of diverse social classes and numerous generations, even though young people comprise most of the movement. While there is as yet no evidence to indicate that a majority of the opposition advocates an outright regime change, they are committed to significant reform of the political system.

The movement is not restricted only to street protestors, which in June numbered three million, according to Tehran's conservative mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf. Advisory group members cited growing support for the opposition movement from religious and conservative Iranians who historically have backed hardliners such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. According to a groundbreaking survey, which was conducted by a member of the advisory

group and other Iranian scholars in Tehran, large percentages of Iranians living in villages in Fars and Isfahan provinces—once popular bases of support for Ahmadinejad—now say that they wish they had not voted for him. In his report to the advisory group of his research, the member explained that the series of polls were conducted by scholars in Iran from August 2009 to December 2009. It is important to emphasize that, in such provinces, Iranians have benefited from Ahmadinejad's economic policy of providing stipends to the underprivileged and allocating funding to the provinces where they live precisely to keep his political base intact.

The diversity of the opposition is a stark contrast to the movement of ten years ago, when Mohammad Khatami was president. According to the advisory group members, during those years, the fleeting opposition was comprised mostly of young journalists and university students. Despite their attempts, they failed to broaden the movement. At the peak of protests in the summer of 1999, estimates of the turnout were in the tens of thousands, which is miniscule compared to the three million demonstrators in the summer of 2009. Even though a decade, not a generation, has passed since that time, oppositionists today also are more fearless, despite the overwhelming brutality of the IRGC and the *basij* militias they control. The violence committed against the Iranian people by the state security forces is the worst in twenty years, according to Amnesty International. In the fall of 2009, an estimated forty thousand Iranians were arrested and thousands tortured in prisons.

Another important feature of at least a part of the opposition today is that it has openly begun to abandon the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Revolution. Although this trend is not universal among all oppositionists, still it is a departure from the movement of ten years ago. At that time, the dissidents on the streets of Tehran still firmly believed that an Islamic system also could function as a republic. Today, however, perhaps not the majority, but certainly a significant minority within the opposition would like to dissolve the Islamic system. This objective is what prompts them to condemn Ayatollah

Khamenei publicly and stomp their feet on portraits of him, as they did for the first time in November, during a state-sponsored rally to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In addition, the opposition does not direct its ire at the United States; the familiar chants of “Down with America” have vanished from public discourse, at least within the opposition. In this way, the opposition effectively is depriving the regime of its revolutionary ideology, which has served to preserve what little legitimacy the state has left in the eyes of the people. And finally, the opposition is not a champion of either the rights of Palestinians or of Muslims in general. The Islamic Republic’s ideological ambition to defend the oppressed in the region against Western supremacy has no relevance for the opposition, which is narrowly focused on Iran’s domestic politics.

THE STATE OF THE IRANIAN REGIME

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the protest movement is that the aura of sanctity that had surrounded Supreme Leader Khamenei has been shattered. The intensive rivalry for power among competing factions inside Iran’s government cannot be overestimated. The hardliners led by President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei believe that they are in a fight not only for their own survival, but for the preservation of the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which is rule by a supreme cleric. Khamenei no longer is respected as a powerful political authority, nor is he considered a legitimate religious leader with divine attributes. Moreover, the concept of supreme clerical rule itself now increasingly is viewed by many as a form of government that inevitably leads to despotism and should be abolished. It is clear now that a country that once aspired to be an Islamic state and a republic cannot withstand all power concentrated in the hands of one ayatollah. As a result, in the eyes of many Iranians, the Islamic Republic of Iran is no longer an Islamic state, nor a republic.

Questioning Khamenei's legitimacy within Iranian civil society is devastating enough for the regime, but even more threatening has been the clerical establishment's public criticism of him. While this criticism has existed under the surface for many years, it was not until the political crisis caused by the rigged June presidential election that the critique became public. Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, until his death in December 2009, led the public critique of Khamenei, and now serves as inspiration to other clerics to follow his lead. Montazeri's statements, in a series of postings that appeared on his website from the disputed presidential election in June until his death on December 19, 2009, reflected the views of thousands of clerics and seminarians who, behind the scenes, are widely reported to be weighing in on the battle for power inside Iran. But there are also a number of conservative clerics who disapprove of the government's policies and actions. Chief among these grand ayatollahs is Abdollah Javadi-Amoli, who stepped aside as Qom's Friday prayer leader in a sign of protest against government actions in recent months.

The clergy's stance on the political crisis has become so important that Ahmadinejad, who is not popular with the clerical establishment, has taken to wooing the clerics by making trips to the holy Shiite city of Qom, home to much of the clergy and the base of their influential seminaries. His most recent trip was on March 18. This is not to say that the majority of clerics oppose Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. It is likely that the clerics are split. According to one advisory group member, who is a respected expert on Iran's Shiite clerics, even those who do not support Khamenei and Ahmadinejad might be unwilling to say so in public for a variety of reasons, including the fact that clerics rely on the state to some degree to fund their seminaries. Before the election, commentators called out for the clerics to announce publicly who they were endorsing for president. The Combatant Clergy Association—one of the two traditionalist associations of clerics in Qom—has many members who support Ahmadinejad. But other members did not want to take an official position before the elections out of fear of causing an internal rift.

Another important shift in the political dynamic is the role that key leaders are playing as a bridge between the opposition and the regime. Advisory group members discussed attempts by some moderate conservatives to mediate between the opposition and the hardliners within the regime. Since the advisory group meeting in February, one moderate conservative figure, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has positioned himself in such a role. A former Iranian president who helped found the Islamic Republic, Rafsanjani was critical of the regime this past summer. But since that time, his allegiance with one side or the other has been in question. In March, Rafsanjani made clear that he has returned to the fold of the system; however, he is returning as an independent player who seems determined to retain his power as the chairman of two important political councils while also working within the state to enforce some of the demands of the opposition. One such change Rafsanjani is working on is to reform Iran's electoral process in order for a commission—not a body of hardline clerics appointed by Khamenei—to make key decisions in running elections. The Green Movement had hoped that Rafsanjani, an arch enemy of Ahmadinejad, would come down squarely on its side. But despite his criticism, in which he said that Iran should be ruled more as a republic—a reference to the creeping military dictatorship that Khamenei is advancing—Rafsanjani appears now to be serving as a middle ground between the opposition and the regime, which is not necessarily a loss for the opposition movement.

MAIN WEAPON FOR BOTH SIDES COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

Free speech in Iran is severely limited and the media is predominantly state-controlled. As a result, recent years have seen the Internet become a primary source of information for millions of Iranians. Over the past eight years, the number of Internet users has grown at an average annual rate of 48 percent, increasing from 1 million in 2000 to 23 million in 2008. The rate of users is higher than that of

any other state in the Middle East, and today represents around 35 percent of the Iranian population.

The Iranian blogosphere also is flourishing and is one of the largest in the world. The number of Persian active blogs is estimated to be approximately 60,000—an astounding number that reflects people’s desire to communicate outside those channels more explicitly controlled by the state. Communication through Internet-based phone services such as Skype, disposable cell phones, or phone lines under fictitious names is becoming more common, particularly as the regime’s spying technology has become more sophisticated. Stories inside Iran abound of Iranians who are imprisoned within a day or even a few hours after speaking with Westerners outside the country whom the regime might perceive to be a threat.

The regime’s technical filtering and censorship of the Internet is one of the most extensive in the world. Iran has produced on Iranian soil the technology for identifying and blocking websites considered politically harmful or un-Islamic. Just as China has done, by producing this technology domestically, Iran is becoming less reliant on Western sources. This has been important for the regime, which considers using Western technology for the Internet a weakness. The ruling elite is well aware of the power of information technology, both for advancing its own propaganda and for assisting the rise of popular opposition movements. Here, the recent upheavals in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in the face of new technologies have provided salutary examples of their potential threat to the existing order. The collapse of communism, too, was to some degree influenced by access to foreign media and the new technologies at the time, which allowed Russians and other populations a glimpse into the outside world.

In 2009, the IRGC established a state-sanctioned Cyber Defense Command. This was the most significant action by the state to counter online political activism. This institution is responsible for investigating “cyber crimes.” The IRGC, with vast political influence, also has managed to have laws passed that make

distributing anti-filtering technology or introducing the public to methods of bypassing censorship illegal. In mid-March, the office of Tehran's General and Revolutionary Courts announced that thirty individuals suspected of having been involved in organized "cyber wars" were arrested after a series of complicated intelligence operations in the field of communications technology. This followed a wave of attacks against anti-government websites and blogs by a group called Iran's Cyber Army, comprised of renegade, pro-regime activists.

Regulating the Internet did not begin with the current political crisis. In 2006, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology issued an order designed to limit household access to broadband Internet access at high speeds. This obstacle limits the users' ability to download content from the Internet.

Before the events on February 11, the Iranian authorities slowed Internet service in Iran, shut down text messaging services, and blocked Google and Gmail. Google confirmed a drop in traffic during this period. The interruption of Internet access in Iran was a significant setback for opposition activists, who use the Internet and related social-networking technologies to organize their demonstrations. Since June, when the opposition showed it could mobilize millions of Iranians onto the streets through the Internet and social networking, the regime has worked hard to block these forms of technologies. The IRGC reportedly has bought 51 percent of shares in a telecommunications firm for an estimated \$8 billion, and have established blockades of entire hubs of technology using foreign expertise.

THE APPROACH THE UNITED STATES AND THE WEST SHOULD TAKE TOWARD IRAN

Iranian members of the advisory group agreed that U.S. and Western policy toward Iran should pursue a multi-track approach—keeping the door open to

engagement while highlighting the regime's atrocious human rights record—rather than view policy options as a stark choice between a military attack and acquiescence to a repressive regime.

The current focus on sanctions is problematic. Existing sanctions have not deterred Iran's nuclear aspirations, nor have they contained Iran's support for Islamic militant organizations, nor have they changed the regime's behavior. And the so-called “crippling” sanctions that the U.S. Congress now is considering could give the regime an excuse to crack down on the middle class—the largest base of support for the opposition. Opposition activists believe that such measures would be turned against them, while doing little to slow Iran's nuclear program.

At the same time, however, many dissidents are adamantly opposed to direct assistance and public endorsements from the United States, both of which undoubtedly would taint their cause and reaffirm the regime's accusations that members of the opposition movement are Western tools or agents. The regime continues to blame Western powers, particularly the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, for instigating unrest and directing the opposition movement from abroad. While it can be assumed that a large part of the Iranian population does not believe the government's propaganda, segments of society with access only to state-run media and no access to international media are more likely to believe the regime's explanations. The regime has used various intimidation strategies to discourage Iranians from accepting funding from the U.S. government, or even from private foundations and think tanks in the United States.

The Iranian Intelligence Ministry in January published a list of sixty foundations and research institutions that Iran claims are backed by Israel and the United States to foment a popular rebellion. Iranians are forbidden from having any association with these organizations, which include the Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment of Democracy, and the Woodrow Wilson Center. This threat already is having an effect; scholars

in Tehran are now refusing invitations to attend conferences that are organized or funded by institutions on the government's blacklist.

THE OPPOSITION'S EXPECTATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

Despite differences within the opposition over the type of U.S. assistance, many dissidents agree that some form of support is vital to advance their movement, which eventually could bring some degree of political reform to the system. At the advisory group meeting in February, participants were in agreement that the United States should pursue a multifaceted strategy: If sanctions are imposed, the United States also should help the opposition indirectly through assistance with information technologies, and address the regime's success in using it to limit and control free expression and activism.

The Iranian activists on the advisory group unanimously agreed that the United States should embark on a clear policy to realize full power of digital technologies. At the same time, they said that they opposed more broad-based U.S. sanctions and expressed great concern over moves intended to "help" the opposition that might give the regime excuses to claim foreign interference and deepen an already repressive crackdown on civil society.

As a solution that could help the opposition without tainting it, they proposed a list of measures that the U.S. government could undertake in order to combat the coercive actions of the Iranian government and make it easier for Iranians to connect to the outside world, and to one another, through the Internet and satellite television. The free flow of information also would be beneficial in helping Iranians become knowledgeable of events inside Iran. Because the media is run by the state, most Iranians are fed a steady diet of regime propaganda and either have a distorted view of events in the country or never learn about them at all. The most glaring example of this issue is the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, the

young woman who was shot fatally by security agents this past summer as she demonstrated peacefully in Tehran, which became a cause célèbre for the Green Movement and enabled oppositionists to mobilize tens of thousands to protest her death. Millions of Iranians, deprived of the news in the state-run media, did not learn of her death until weeks after it had occurred.

Legislation has been drafted in the U.S. Congress aimed at aiding the opposition. Representative Keith Ellison (D-MN) has drafted a bill, the Stand With the Iranian People Act (SWIPA), which now has been referred to committee. Some of the provisions of the bill include working to ensure that sanctions are targeted at the government and not the Iranian people, and working with the United Nations to focus attention and investigate human rights abuses in Iran. Other legislation, introduced by Representative Jim Moran (D-VA), which has been referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, states that the export of software and related services to Iran by U.S. firms is not prohibited or restricted, in order to allow software and related services to be sold or exported to private Iranian citizens so that they can bypass the online censorship imposed by the state. The bill also bans such software from being sold to the Iranian government.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The Iranian members of the advisory group have produced the following recommendations:

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

Increase Iranian Public Access to Unfiltered Internet

- Sanction companies that assist the Iranian government in Internet filtering, surveillance, and eavesdropping.

Support Tools that Allow Iranians to Communicate Freely in and outside Iran

- *Provide Skype credits.* This Internet service allows Iranians inside the country to establish secure means of communications with those outside the country. By purchasing Skype credits, sold in amounts as low as \$30 dollars, users would be able to contact the outside world freely without fearing government's eavesdropping efforts.
- *Create a secure e-mail service that can be accessed by activists inside Iran.* There is no major secure free e-mail in Iran. Yahoo! Mail provides very little security; Gmail provides more security, but is still vulnerable to keylogging, or capturing of a user's keystrokes. The Iranian government banned Gmail access recently, thus disabling access to Gmail's relatively better e-mail services.
- *Encourage/permit tech companies to support Persian-language online advertising.* This would give Iranians abroad another private-sector tool to reach those inside the country and allow websites promoting human rights to distribute information while making a small amount of advertising money that would help them pay for their costs.
- *Fund/permit Persian-fluent web developers to partner in building websites for civil society.* There is a need for developers to build Persian websites. There are a number of web developers outside Iran who have good command of Persian and are willing to build such websites. Payment to such developers inside Iran can be capped at \$30,000 a year per organization in order to limit abuses.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

Use Sanctions and Technology to Counter Satellite Jamming The Islamic Republic sends jamming signals to commercial satellites, disrupting their broadcasts. Many commercial satellites are reluctant to host Persian-language

television channels, fearing their satellites might get attacked. These satellites can be jammed because uploads and downloads are sent on a fixed frequency. Newer commercial and military satellites, however, are built to resist such jamming via noise filtering and anti-jamming equipment.

- *Levy sanctions on Western and Iranian companies actively involved in helping the Iranian government's satellite jamming.* Prominent Western satellite firms, such as IntelSat in the United States and EUTelSat of France, are helping the Iranian government to block its citizens' access to foreign news networks such as the BBC, Voice of America, and German television, while at the same time providing satellite services to the Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting (IRIB).
- *Dedicate a hardened satellite to host Iranian channels.* This would enable effective Persian news services, such as BBC Persian and Voice of America, to escape the Islamic Republic's routine jamming efforts. This is one of the most important measures that can be undertaken by the U.S. government in order to ease the free flow of information to Iran.
- *Facilitate the provision of high-speed Internet via satellite.* The regime deliberately has slowed the Internet to reduce the speed in which Iranians can read and communicate via the Internet. Making alternative satellites available—aside those used by the regime—could allow Iranians to have high-speed Internet.
- *Broadcast digital content via satellite to millions of users in Iran.* This is less expensive than the two-way satellite connection discussed above. One-way content delivery would permit the transmission of popular web-sites, such as YouTube, to users inside the country.

Increase Iranian Public Access to Unfiltered Internet

- *Make the export of software, hardware, technology, and services exempt from U.S. sanctions in order to overcome the Iranian government's means*

to block or filter Internet access. Currently, companies such as Microsoft and Google block Internet downloads by Iranians, fearing that such Internet traffic might violate U.S. sanction laws. For example, GTalk and Google Earth are not available to Iranian users. The Iranian government easily can access such technologies through its proxies abroad, but citizens cannot.

NEXT STEPS

The outcome of the internal conflict inside Iran will have a direct effect upon Iran's relationship with the United States, the West, and its neighbors in the Middle East. Members of the advisory group believe that the Islamic republic is at a critical juncture. Not only is Iran engaged in the fiercest internal struggle since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but it could be on the brink of becoming a nuclear-armed state.

The work of the advisory group over the next year will include an examination of the human rights violations in Iran, which will be the focus of the advisory group's next session in July in Brussels with members of the European Parliament. The advisory group also will engage in an assessment of security concerns in the Persian Gulf, where the IRGC increasingly maintain a dominant presence in the Strait of Hormuz, the central waterway for transmitting oil from the Persian Gulf region. And, the advisory group will remain focused on the state of the opposition movement in Iran and policies that the United States could adopt to help empower oppositionists to create a more open civil society in order to make political reform in Iran a realistic possibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GENEIVE ABDO is the director of the Iran Program at The Century Foundation, a think tank with offices in New York and Washington, D.C. Her current research focuses on contemporary Iran and political Islam. She is the creator and editor of the newly launched website, insideIRAN.org. She was formerly the liaison officer for the Alliance of Civilizations, a U.N. initiative under Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Before joining the United Nations, Abdo was a foreign correspondent. Her twenty-year career focused on coverage of the Middle East and the Muslim world. From 1998 to 2001, she was the Iran correspondent for the British newspaper the *Guardian* and a regular contributor to the *Economist* and the *International Herald Tribune*. From 2001 to 2002, she was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, and that year also received a prestigious John Simon Guggenheim fellowship. She has also received research grants from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the United States Institute of Peace. She is the author of *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and the coauthor of *Answering Only to God: Faith and Freedom in Twenty-First Century Iran* (Henry Holt, 2003). Her latest book is *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

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