

Fuelling Mistrust Between Iran and the United States

By Roger Howard | June 14, 2005

Imagine your reaction if, during last November's presidential contest, the mullahs of Iran had suddenly launched a tirade of criticism against the American system of democracy and beamed their message onto our television sets and radios for all of us to hear: democracy in the United States, the mullahs might perhaps have claimed, is a corrupt process that is determined largely by the influence of the wealthiest donors, and a process that wholly fails to address the religious needs of a secular, materialist culture.

Most ordinary Americans, it can be fairly said, would be outraged by the sanctimonious tone and intrusive nature of those who know nothing firsthand of what they condemn. They would probably deeply resent such comments as unwarranted and deeply unfair, and view the Iranian regime with even more mistrust, and perhaps loathing, than ever before.

Now listen to some of the comments ventured by administration spokesmen about Iran's pending presidential elections, which are due to be held on Friday, June 17th. The election, as State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 19, "will represent another setback for democracy ... because the political process and the media are controlled and manipulated by an unselected few." Such control and manipulation, he continued, inevitably frustrated President Bush's declared aim of sponsoring democratic reforms "from Damascus to Tehran" that would make the wider world a better and safer place.

The strong criticisms of Iran's domestic politics that have been expressed by the President and his spokesmen are also being beamed into Iran more vigorously than ever before: since late last year the administration has granted millions of dollars to fund satellite television and radio stations that, from their studios in the United States, transmit often radical messages straight into the homes of ordinary Iranians. What's more, Washington is now actively funding political groups that, from their exiles, support the cause of democracy inside Iran.

The real criticism of this highly sanctimonious tone is not that such comments are in any way unfounded. Iran's elections will be, as administration spokesmen claim, not far from a sham. The clerical regime has already barred more than 1,000 hopefuls from standing in the race in the same way that, in February last year, thousands of potential candidates in the parliamentary elections were similarly barred by hardliners who feared the reforms they championed. This week there is only one presidential candidate who is standing with an openly "reformist" agenda; Mustafa Moin, and his supporters have been subjected to a vicious campaign of harassment and intimidation by the regime's vigilantes—or thugs—who carry out its dirty work.

The trouble with voicing such strong, brazen criticisms of another country's domestic politics is not that they are without foundation but that they fuel mutual mistrust and suspicion. Amongst ordinary Iranians they are more likely to irk, stirring resentment at foreign interference, in the same way as the mullah's imaginary tirade against our own ways. Amongst the leadership, however, they can only heighten fears that Washington is committed to regime change in Iran, perhaps with the same insidiousness that was once deployed against Mohammed Mossadeq, the Iranian prime minister who was toppled by the CIA in 1953.

If Tehran's fears of American aggression are heightened even more, the prospect of some diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries, more than 25 years since they were broken off, inevitably becomes even more illusory. Not only that, the

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Iranians could start to take preventive measures against a possible U.S. assault, covert or otherwise, that would create a dangerous Catch-22 situation by convincing Washington that Tehran is determined to undermine American strategic interests in the Middle East.

Imagine this scenario. Deeply alarmed by the sharp tone and heightened pitch of American criticism, Tehran secretly deploys more Revolutionary Guards into Iraq, hoping to build up close contact and cooperation amongst the Shia peoples who could take Iran's side in the event of an American assault. Detecting this deployment, however, Washington becomes even more certain that Iran lies at the heart of the Iraqi insurgency against the post-Saddam government, and orders a punitive raid against suspected militant hideouts right along the border with Iran.

This is hardly a recipe for peace in the Middle East. It is more like the darkest days of the Cold War, when both East and West remained convinced of each others' bad intent only to find that the mistrust between them was creating, rather than just manifesting, the "threat" each other posed.

How, then, can American politicians reconcile their interest in promoting democracy and freedom across the world with the need to defuse, not fuel, the dangerous state of mistrust between Iran and the United States? Instead of making more precise references to "democracy," "the barring of candidates," and "harassment," perhaps it would be less intrusive simply to implore the mullahs not to frustrate the will of

the Iranian people. If we return to the imagined scenario with which we began, it would be hard to protest at the Iranian mullahs if they merely expressed a comparable wish to see a new president be fairly elected in the United States. Let the American people freely decide what's good for them, this message might more succinctly be saying, and leave Iranian politics to the Iranians.

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