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Ignore Iran's Exiled Dream Merchants

Geneive Abdo, Mehrzad Boroujerdi , The Daily Star, 6/24/2008

When they worry about Washington, leading lights in the Iranian government imagine this kind of scene: a room packed with young and impassioned Iranian exiles and a few low-ranking US government officials debating how to prepare Iran's amorphous opposition movement for the day when the regime in Tehran seems weak enough to fall. The assumption at the heart of that debate is not whether Iran's government will collapse, but when and by what means.

A participant from the US State Department makes clear her annoyance with the speaker. "You keep talking about the parliamentary elections and who won and who lost. We don't care about the players in the state. They are all the same. We care about civil society." Another self-assured participant declares that a revolution is inevitable.

This particular discussion is not a figment of the Iranian imagination. It happened a few weeks ago at a quasi-governmental institution, which must remain anonymous because the event was closed to the press. But how can Washington be so delusional to believe a velvet revolution in Iran is possible? Faced with perpetual problems in Iraq and congressional pressure to do something about the meddlesome Iranians, the administration is eager to conceive of a change in Iran.

To the surprise of many, this Iranian playbook seems to follow a similar script as the activities orchestrated before the invasion of Iraq. Like the funding for exile groups which accompanied the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, the Bush administration has recently allocated $75 million for "democracy promotion" in Iran. While some of the money is simply devoted to beaming Persian-language radio and television programs into Iran, substantial funds have also been given to Iranian dissidents who, in theory at least, will work inside the country to foster rebellion.

In some circles in Washington, including US-funded institutions, internal rebellion as a form of regime change is preferred over a military strike. But just like the military option, it is anyone's guess to what degree the Bush administration plans to pursue this strategy during its final months in office. What is certain is that the Iranian exile community will peddle the popular rebellion idea with the next administration, no matter who is elected president.

There is a practical problem, however, for the Bush administration and its successor. There is hardly any agreement within the Iranian opposition on how to change the regime. For dissidents inside Iran, money or endorsements from the United States are the kiss of death. Activists themselves point out that the Bush administration's decision to fund civil society organizations has tainted the credibility of non-governmental organizations and other groups in the eyes of ordinary citizens.

However, the democracy activists inside Iran do not advocate yet another revolution, velvet or otherwise. As the former Yugoslav politician and author Milovan Djilas used to say: "[N]ormal life cannot sustain revolutionary attitudes for long." If we consider what Iranians have gone through since 1979, when the shah was overthrown, their yearning for normality and averting radical change

becomes quite understandable.

The Iranian exiles agitating for "regime change" constitute a diverse group. Some are opposed to the Tehran-based regime, but don't trust American intentions. Some are relatively well-established opponents who offer paternalistic and smug messages of "liberation" on satellite TV stations beamed into Iran from California or Washington. Still, others are recent arrivals, some of whom were involved in the late-1990s student movement that was crushed. They long to return to a democratic Iran and are working toward that end. Intoxicated by their own rhetoric, warped nostalgia, and forlorn hopes, the latter two categories of exiled activists have now turned their attention toward the goal of rebellion from within.

The result is a marriage of convenience. The Bush administration can tell its impatient critics that it is proactively pressuring the Iranian leadership while placing the military option on hold. Iranian exiles genuinely feel that with the help of US funding they can finally exert real pressure on a brutal regime. If things don't go according to plan, the excuses are built in. The US government can always claim that "Iranian Ahmad Chalabis" only offered misplaced hope and misleading promises, and the Iranian exiles can claim that the US would not follow their recommendations.

In the meantime, neither side is interested in asking the many disconcerting questions raised by the regime-change approach: Are these Iranian exile groups the right people for the job? What social backing do they enjoy inside Iran? Why can't they cooperate among themselves? How will their activities be received in an Iranian polity where suspicion of Western imperialism runs deep and spans the political spectrum? Won't this activity further bolster a paranoid and security obsessed regime?

The fact remains that the Bush administration's search for an Iranian Lech Walesa has been as futile as the notion of the Iranian opposition closing ranks behind a single leader. Hence, one is left with the question of the American alternatives, short of a military attack or a revolution. One approach is for Washington to drop all preconditions and enter into serious direct negotiations with Iran. This is the least palatable option for the Bush administration, but for the next administration (particularly if it is a Democratic one) it may be the most realistic.

If and when Washington decides to settle on the option of unconditional negotiations, it would be wise to remember that it must engage the whole spectrum of political power in Iran, rather than imprudently picking and choosing "moderates" or "pragmatists." The ones who should have Washington's ear are those in charge in Tehran, not the dream merchants of the Iranian diaspora. The US should think hard before allowing yet another active exile community to direct US foreign policy.

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