



# Iranian Civil Society, U.S. Engagement, and Opportunities for Reform

Presented at the CSID 10th Annual  
Conference

Cecile Coronato  
May 5th, 2009

## **INTRODUCTION**

2009 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and with June's presidential elections and talk of engagement with the United States, the Islamic Republic has reached a crossroads in its brief yet tumultuous lifespan. A suffering economy, disenfranchised youth, and a rise in the repression of social and political rights may be setting Iran on the course toward a second revolution. Despite its lack of freedom, Iranian civil society remains a strong force for political change, possessing the political will that is the lifeblood of all successful democracies. The question remains, how can this valuable resource be tapped?

The aim of this study is to examine the various elements within Iranian society that provide opportunities for meaningful political change. From a widely educated population and the presence of reform-minded clerics, to NGOs and the women's rights movement – by regional standards, Iranian civil society is quite developed. Institutions and ideologies are already in place that could foster true democratization, if only they were given the opportunity.

Modernization has brought with it a wave of societal secularization which has widened the gap between citizen and state. While Mohammad Khatami's presidency in the late 1990's brought with it hopes of reform, these hopes never reached fruition. The reform movement suffered from Khatami's inability to deliver but after nearly four years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, many are ready for change. If a moderate is able to defeat Ahmadinejad in the upcoming elections, at the very least, civil society may gain a much-needed ally in the government. Furthermore, comprehensive U.S.-Iranian dialogue no longer seems to be a question of "if" but "when" and "how." Given that, the U.S. is in a unique position to engage not only Iran's government but its people. However, we must tread lightly in this matter, as decades of foreign interference remain fresh in Iranian minds. Therefore, the second goal of this paper is to examine the best strategies for the U.S. to engage Iran to help, not hinder, an opening of the political process.

## **THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN IRAN**

Despite a brief and modest opening of the political space in the late 1990s<sup>1</sup>, the revolutionary ideals of justice and equality are far from realized. In fact, over the last few years Iran has greatly stepped up its wholesale crackdown on civil liberties – from the pervasive detention and harassment of journalists and political activists to severe limitations on freedom of association, freedom of religion, and free and fair elections.<sup>2</sup> Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2009 survey pegs Iran as one of six countries whose government has been “the most outspoken in denouncing internal democratic forces and alleged subversion by outsiders, and the most aggressive in repressing opposition parties, nongovernmental organizations, and independent media.”

While the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a broad movement that included groups which spanned the ideological spectrum, it was Khomeini’s conservative forces that ultimately gained control and utilized Islam as the basis for governance and justice. The Islamic Republic of Iran is governed by a complex system of fragmented bodies. The most powerful institution in Iran remains the office of the Supreme Leader, whose power stems from *velayat-e faqih*, or “rule of the Islamic jurist.” He is appointed for life by the Assembly of Experts, a body of 86 clerics elected by popular vote from a government-filtered list of candidates. The Supreme Leader commands the armed forces and appoints the heads of the judiciary, the state broadcast media, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Expediency Council, and 6 of the 12 members of the Guardian Council.

All of the candidates for the popularly-elected positions of president, parliamentarian, and Assembly of Experts are vetted by the Guardian Council; a body which consists of 6 clergymen (selected by the Supreme Leader) and 6 civil law experts (selected by the head of the judiciary). Aside from resolving who is eligible to run in elections, the Guardian Council is also tasked with interpreting the constitution and determining the compatibility of legislation with Sharia. The President serves as the head of government appointing ministers, chairing the National Security Council, and controlling the Planning and Budget Organization. Meanwhile, the parliament, or Majles, has the power

---

<sup>2</sup> See “2008 Human Rights Report: Iran,” U.S. Department of State.

to draft legislation, ratify treaties, approve states of emergency, and approve the annual budget.<sup>3</sup>

The two terms of reformist president Mohammad Khatami saw the rise and fall of what could have been a relatively vibrant reform period. Even with reformers holding 71 percent of the seats in parliament, Khatami was unable to effect lasting change, underscoring the true power of the conservative arms of government from the judiciary to the Revolutionary Guards. The Guardian Council, for example, vetoed 111 out of 297 bills passed by the Majles in support of civil liberties.<sup>4</sup> President Khatami's "twin bills" had proposed small but key changes to election laws and outlined the president's power to prevent violations of the constitution by government institutions; however, after lengthy deliberation the bills were rejected by the Guardian Council. The conservative assault on the reform movement was solidified by the surprising election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. The country's first non-cleric president in 24 years, Ahmadinejad came to power on a platform of anti-corruption, economic change, and maintaining the principles of the revolution.

Since that fateful election-day in June of 2005, Iranians have seen the continued mantra of "national security" invoked to justify the silencing of dissent. Freedom of expression is severely limited with the government controlling media broadcasting, approving the publication of all books, censoring internet content, and jailing journalists, bloggers, academics and students for ambiguous offenses such as "insulting Islam." Since Ahmadinejad assumed office, 570 publications have been shut down.<sup>5</sup> The government also significantly restricts academic freedom, dismissing dozens of secular and liberal professors from universities and requiring all prospective students to pass "character tests" to vet out those deemed "antigovernment." While the constitution provides for the establishment of political parties and professional and religious associations, in practice the government limits freedom of association through intimidation and imposition of arbitrary requirements on organizations. Ahead of the March 2008 Majles elections, authorities rejected

---

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," Congressional Research Service, January 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Hossein Bashiriyeh, "The Islamic Revolution Derailed," *The Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30*, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> "Freedom in the World 2008: Iran," Freedom House.

the candidacies of nearly 2,000 applicants while many reformist incumbents were disqualified after closed-door negotiations with the Guardian Council.<sup>6</sup> And the laundry list of poor human rights practices continues with the persecution and discrimination of religious and ethnic minorities to the appalling practice of juvenile executions (Iran was, in 2008, the only country to have executed juvenile offenders, with a total of 6), to name but a few.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to a poor human rights record, Iran also boasts a troubled economy, with unemployment at around 12 percent and inflation topping out at 28 percent. Making matters worse, approximately two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30; and while making great strides in providing access to education, the Islamic Republic has not fared as well in creating jobs to suit the educated masses. Robin Wright asserts that Iran's baby boom of the early 1980s now means that the government must create up to 800,000 jobs a year. As these children are now reaching their twenties and facing the choices of marriage and finding a house and a job, their calculus is shifting toward ways of managing their economic situation. "As a result, political opposition among Iran's youth over the next decade could grow significantly...because neither reformers nor conservatives have effective economic programs to spur job creation."<sup>8</sup> Bahman Baktiari explains "in 2007, by the government's own reckoning, nearly every other Iranian between the ages of 25 and 29 was unemployed."<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani argues "the onset of the economic slowdown at this time will likely inflict more damage on youth than any other age group."<sup>10</sup> This is a dire situation and one that is further compounded by the lack of basic freedoms.

While Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had campaigned on a platform of edalat, or economic justice, Kaveh-Cyrus Sanandaji explains that his time in office has been marked by a period of stagflation that has led to the deterioration of living conditions. "With rising inflation, widespread unemployment and persistent negative growth, the danger of popular unrest – as previewed during the fuel–

---

<sup>6</sup> See "2008 Human Rights Report: Iran," U.S. Department of State.

<sup>7</sup> See 2009 Human Rights Watch Report on Iran.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Wright, "In Iran, Students Urge Citizens Not to Vote," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Bahman Baktiari, "Iranian Society: A Surprising Picture," *The Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30*, 2009, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Tough Times Ahead for the Iranian Economy," The Brookings Institution, April 6, 2009.

rationing riots in June 2007 and more recently in October 2008 during the country-wide bazaar strike over the introduction of a 3 percent sales tax – has certainly alarmed the clerical establishment.”

Although the president is generally constrained in his powers, economic policy is one of the few areas for which he is responsible. The regime feels vulnerable, due in no small part to Ahmadinejad’s short-comings, and thus has tightened its grip on society. Both reformists and conservatives alike have signified their displeasure with the president’s failed economic policies. Will this be reflected at the polls in June? Has Ahmadinejad’s administration become a liability for the ruling clerics?

## **IDENTIFYING AVENUES FOR REFORM**

Although Iranian society continues to deal with its fair share of oppression, there are still a number of elements that operate to keep the notion of democratic freedom alive. There is no unified, overarching “reform movement” per se but a vast network of Islamic and secularist organizations, some which seek to implement gradual changes from within and others that call for an overhaul of the current system. Much like the movement to depose the Shah, the current movement for reform consists of individuals and organizations which occupy the full ideological spectrum, from the religiously-minded “modernist-right” and “Islamic-left” to the more recent phenomenon of “secular-democrats.”<sup>11</sup> However, what allows this movement greater cohesion than the one that came before it is that it seeks to institutionalize democratic principles (albeit to varying degrees), rather than rid the country of an out-of-touch despot. If a vibrant civil society is a necessary precursor to democratization, Iran is on the right path. Despite the stifling atmosphere, grassroots movements are alive and well.

### **NGOs**

While Iran has a history of localized charitable organizations, Golnaz Esfandiari explains that the expansion of the NGO sector is a “response to both global trends as well as the country’s internal needs. [These organizations] deal with

---

<sup>11</sup> See “Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution’s Soul,” International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 5, August 2002; see also Mehrdad Mashayekhi, “Metamorphosis of the Post-Revolutionary Oppositional Political Discourse in Iran,” *Gozaar*, April 8, 2009.

broader development and social issues, rather than providing direct charity.”<sup>12</sup> Under Khatami, nongovernmental organizations saw a growth in number and function as his government provided subsidies to aid in their development. Hadi Ghaemi, an Iran expert with Human Rights Watch argues that civil society development under Khatami was “one of the most valuable outcomes of the reform movement.” However, much of this has been stymied or reversed under Ahmadinejad, as no safeguards were put in place to prevent NGO dismantlement. Additionally, like many of its Middle Eastern neighbors, Iranian laws governing NGO establishment and registration are cumbersome and intrusive. Any NGO seeking registration must do so through the Interior Ministry (and thus remain under its watchful eye), acceptance of foreign grants is subject to pre-approval by the government, and working with international NGOs is quite difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Explaining the general concern exhibited by the regime, Mehdi Khalaji explains “any social or cultural activity outside the regime’s supervision is subject to suspicion, especially in the wake of the ‘color revolutions’ that led to the replacement of leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>14</sup> As social and economic conditions continue to frustrate the population, the Iranian regime remains wary of any organized outlet for this frustration. For the most part, the government works to prevent domestic NGOs from working closely with one another or with foreign organizations and activists. An increase in arrests of foreign scholars and activists along with efforts to curtail contacts with foreign groups, especially those based in the U.S., severely limits the development of this sector of civil society.

Regardless of the problems encountered there are still numerous NGOs functioning inside Iran, and some figures place the number around 8,000. From environmental issues to women’s rights, these organizations serve as a channel for civic action and societal ownership that is otherwise lacking in the Islamic Republic. Grassroots movements are an integral part of this civic action. A prime example is the One Million Signatures Campaign, which began in 2006

---

<sup>12</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, “Iran: Growing NGO Community Offers Political Activism Where Government Does Not,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 16, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> See Negar Katirai, “NGO Regulations in Iran,” *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, Volume 7, Issue 4, September 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “Bad Veils and Arrested Scholars: Iran’s Fear of a Velvet Revolution,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 24, 2007.

and is focused on attaining the complete equality of rights between women and men. Suffering setbacks from harassment to imprisonment, the movement continues to work to raise awareness that both Iranian women and men find the status quo unacceptable. In summing up its relative achievement toward meaningful reform, Abdollah Momeni asserts that the women's rights movement in general has had "the greatest success of all of Iran's civil society movements, in both exposing human right violations and preventing them."<sup>15</sup>

The variety of nongovernmental organizations within Iran is a true testament to a pervasive social awareness that has evolved in spite of many obstacles. The Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution is one of the country's most active NGOs dealing with ecological issues. The organization's co-founder, Victoria Jamali explained that women and youth, who possess little political representation, are an integral part of the NGO sector.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Shirin Ebadi's Society for Protecting the Rights of Children is an example of an organization with a decidedly humanitarian focus. In addition to aiding in the creation of numerous kindergartens, it provides training and education on a broad range of children's welfare issues. Shiva Dolatabadi, one of the organization's co-founders thinks that the work of NGOs is "having a very positive impact in collective action and the practice of democracy," fostering a culture of responsibility in Iran.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Seyed Javid Aledavoud, director of the Iranian chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), argues that because the political system allows little room for meaningful participation, many Iranians turn to NGOs as the only way to fight for social change.

### The Student Movement

Historically, university campuses in Iran have been breeding grounds for political dissidence from the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s to the reform movement of the 1990s. During the revolution, the student movement was a strong supporter of the Ayatollah, believing that they were the "protectors of and protected by the Supreme Leader" and in many instances served as the

---

<sup>15</sup> Abdollah Momeini, Response to *Gozaar's* Survey on Iranian Civil Society Activists and Observers, accessible at <http://www.gozaar.org/freeform.php?id=79&language=english#momeni>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran: Growing NGO Community Offers Political Activism Where Government Does Not," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. February 16, 2004.



“enforcement arm of the State.”<sup>18</sup> However, as the consolidation of power within government took hold, the leftist faction with which the student movement was aligned was left out in the cold. Abdollah Momeni, a leader of Iran’s largest student association explained that these circumstances forced the movement to take on “a fundamental transformation shifting its functional role from ‘enforcer of the State’ to ‘critic of the state.’”<sup>19</sup> This evolution continued well into the 1990s, reaching its apex as the reform movement and Mohammad Khatami reached the forefront of Iranian politics. Indeed, many attribute Khatami’s upset victory to the students’ vociferous support and word-of-mouth campaign.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as the reformist agenda was never successfully implemented and its failures as a movement came to light, the student movement has continued to evolve and reassess its purpose. Instead of aligning with a particular political party, the movement has sought independence from political power plays, leveling due criticism to those in power as well as the opposition. Momeni argues that the movement has become “the collective consciousness of the people, which with the aid of its constant evaluation of the various power relations at work, promotes freedom and democracy and reduces the gap between the dominant politics and the interests of the people.”<sup>21</sup>

The leading student association in Iran is the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, a moderate left-wing Islamist organization aimed at gradually reforming the current political system and the position of Supreme Leader.<sup>22</sup> Claiming over 60,000 members at some 50 university campuses, the organization gained notoriety by leading the 1979 takeover of the U.S. embassy. However, over the years it has evolved away from Islamic radicalism toward a pro-democracy agenda. While the organization played an integral role in the election of Mohammad Khatami, disappointment with the reform movement and anger over the Council of Guardian’s role in selecting “appropriate” candidates led the group to launch an election boycott in 2005.

---

<sup>18</sup> Mohammad Tahavori, “The Evolution of Iran’s Student Movement: An Interview with Abdollah Momeni.” *Gozaar*. July 1, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Robin Wright, “In Iran, Students Urge Citizens Not to Vote,” *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Tahavori, “The Evolution of Iran’s Student Movement: An Interview with Abdollah Momeni.” *Gozaar*. July 1, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> See “Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution’s Soul,” International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 5, August 2002.

The student movement became the centerpiece of a fierce battle between reformists and hardliners in the summer of 1999. The government closure of the popular independent newspaper, Salaam, prompted the most violent outbreak of mass protests Iran had seen since the early days of the revolution. Students throughout the city gathered at Tehran University to protest, where they were eventually attacked by hundreds of paramilitaries as uniformed police officers stood and watched. This, in turn, sparked five days of rioting throughout the country in which at least five were killed, hundreds wounded, and 1200 to 1400 detained.<sup>23</sup> This incident affected the evolution of the student movement in that it exposed the weaknesses of both the reformist and student movements and made clear the unwillingness of the government to change.<sup>24</sup> From that point on, the movement took on a more independent role from politics.

Four years later, another spate of demonstrations was initiated by a student protest at Tehran University. What began as a demonstration against the school's rumored privatization plans quickly took a turn for the political. "Sensing an opportunity to voice their displeasure with the government, a horde of disenfranchised youth from around the capital...soon joined the student demonstrators...In addition, several thousand middle-class Tehranis, some encouraged by Los Angeles-based Iranian satellite television stations, drove to the campus area and honked horns in solidarity."<sup>25</sup> All in all, close to 10,000 people took part and some 4,000 were reportedly arrested; and while not nearly as massive or violent as the July 1999 protests, these demonstrations were evidence of the massive discontent seething beneath the surface of Iranian society.

## Cyberdissent

After Israel, Iran is believed to have the highest rate of internet usage in the Middle East despite the fact that the government continues to increase control over this domain.<sup>26</sup> Whether through blogging, email, chat rooms, or social networking sites – the internet is a powerful and ever-changing medium,

---

<sup>23</sup> "Iran Student Protests: Five Years On," BBC News, July 8, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Mohammad Tahavori, "The Evolution of Iran's Student Movement: An Interview with Abdollah Momeni,"

<sup>25</sup> "Iran: Discontent and Disarray," International Crisis Group Middle East Briefing, October 15, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> See Freedom House's "Freedom of the Press 2008: Iran."

providing creative ways for citizens to challenge state authority and gain greater access to the outside world. In particular, the Iranian blogosphere has become a popular outlet for those seeking to discuss politics, society, and culture. Unfortunately, it has also become a target in the government's effort to silence dissent.

Toward the end of Khatami's tenure, Iran saw a surge in its blogging population as the government forced numerous reformist journalists out of jobs. Additionally, Iran's massive and technologically savvy youth serve as a critical element in boosting the popularity and pervasiveness of the Iranian weblog and internet in general. Today, there are over 80,000 Iranian bloggers that serve as a powerful force for spreading democratic ideals. Afshin Molavi of the New America Foundation observes, "the political blogs have a power beyond their small readership because of the reverberation effect: when they break a story or simply spread a juicy rumor, it is immediately emailed to hundreds of thousands of wired Iranians and filtered to the non-wired Iranians through word-of-mouth."<sup>27</sup> And while the government has gone to great lengths to filter websites and intimidate bloggers, the blogosphere remains one of Iran's last frontiers of free thought and expression. Because of its sheer size, it is impossible for the regime to monitor every blog and this makes it a vital outlet in a society where the government requires a permit to publish anything from a book to a song.

Many Iranian bloggers have faced intimidation and imprisonment, particularly after the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, and the government has set up a special office of prosecutors in Tehran that deals exclusively with internet crimes. Reporters Without Borders claims Iran has the largest number of threatened cyber-dissidents in the Middle East and is ranked 166 out of 173 countries on the organization's press freedom index.<sup>28</sup> Omidreza Mirsayafi is one of the most recent casualties of Iran's crackdown on cyber-dissidents. He died, under suspicious circumstances, in Evin Prison after being sentenced to two and a half years for insulting religious leaders and engaging in propaganda against the state. He was also awaiting trial for the additional charge of insulting Islam. What makes Mirsayafi's case unique is that most bloggers are jailed in Iran because of their political writings. Yet Mirsayafi's blog was more

---

<sup>27</sup> Katrina Vanden Heuvel, "Bloggers of Iran," *The Nation*. May 30, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> See "Iran – Annual Report 2008," Reporters Without Borders.

cultural, focused on music and art; with the occasional political commentary – and this is ultimately what ended him in prison. What this case demonstrates is that while the internet may be hard for the government to fully monitor, no corner of the Iranian web is completely safe.

As the government works to quell cyberdissent, Farangis Najibullah explains, “[a]ccess is blocked to many online news sources, opposition webpages, and even music websites. And suggestions have been made that the country’s notoriously slow internet speeds are kept that way by design, as it hampers the uploading of photos, audio, and video to websites and blogs.”<sup>29</sup> However, because the government does not have well-defined red lines, its filtering policies are constantly changing. For instance, Facebook and YouTube, having been banned for the past few years were recently unblocked; and now Facebook is the 10<sup>th</sup> most popular website in Iran.<sup>30</sup> Experts differ on the reasoning behind this move, with some arguing that this is a ploy to loosen restrictions and thus boost Ahmadinejad’s chance of reelection, while others see it as another way for intelligence officials to gain greater insight into the personalities working against the government.

## **THE U.S. ROLE – SUPPORTING, NOT SUBVERTING DEMOCRACY**

Over the past few years, the U.S. government has allocated tens of millions of dollars toward democracy promotion efforts in Iran. Such efforts include training of Iranian NGOs, educational and professional exchanges between Iranian and American citizens, and increasing the availability of print and broadcast media that expounds democratic principles.<sup>31</sup> Yet by calling for regime change on the one hand and providing financial assistance to civil society on the other, the U.S. had provided the Iranian regime with a tailor-made excuse to silence dissent. However well-intentioned such aid may have been, in the end it served to be counterproductive, spurring an increased crackdown on various elements of civil society as alleged agents of U.S.-led

---

<sup>29</sup> Farangis Najibullah, “Suspicion Cast on Iranian Blogger’s Death,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 19, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, “Why Did Iran Unblock Facebook?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 14, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen McInerney, “The President’s Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2009: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East,” Project on Middle East Democracy, May 2008; see also Lionel Beehner, “Iranian Civil Society and the Role of U.S. Foreign Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 2007.

regime change. Alexander T.J. Lennon rightly asserts, “[i]n adversarial regimes, tension with the United States has historically provided a pretense for greater political oppression. Conversely, benign relations can allow space for indigenous actors to pursue domestic change, as Gorbachev did in the Soviet Union. In rethinking U.S. strategy, the first step should be to expand government-to-government relations.”<sup>32</sup> As the Obama administration seeks a new way forward with Iran it will be important to take a step back from any policy that runs counter to the objective of building trust between the two governments. The U.S. government would do well to directly engage the regime in Tehran while leaving civil society engagement to elements of the private sector. For this reason, a new approach toward Iran should include government-to-government relations on the one hand, and people-to-people relations on the other.

### Government-to-Government

The obvious focus of the government track will be centered on the nuclear and regional security issues. However, this does not mean that Iran’s poor human rights record should be cast aside. The Obama administration should encourage Tehran to ease civil society restrictions and allow more room for free speech and independent media as part of comprehensive negotiations. Additionally, while maintaining rhetorical support for jailed political activists and general issues of concern, the administration should take the necessary steps to allow greater people-to-people contacts to take place; thus, laying the groundwork for wider engagement on all fronts.

As the U.S. and Iran work to build confidence and cooperation on the nuclear program, Iraq, and Afghanistan there are a number of steps that can be taken to allow greater civil society interaction between the two states. The first and simplest step is to ease restrictions on the issuance of visas, especially for Iranian students seeking an education in the United States. Iran’s large and generally pro-American youth are eager for democratic change and open to Western thought in this regard. Abbas Milani points out that “British and Canadian universities have been reaping a harvest of cash and brilliant students as the result of the visa difficulties faced by Iranian students hoping to study in

---

<sup>32</sup> Alexander T.J. Lennon, “Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy: From Promotion to Support,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2009.

the United States.”<sup>33</sup> Allowing these students to study and travel in the U.S. will pave the way for a new generation of Iranians that will be better equipped to effect lasting democratic change in their own country while helping to build bilateral relations on a foundational level.

A second step should involve the opening of an American interests section in Tehran, much like the one that exists in Havana, Cuba. The Bush administration had toyed with the idea during the summer of 2008 but never followed through with the plan. The new administration should reconsider this option for several reasons. First, by establishing a base of American diplomats in Iran it will signal to the regime and the people that the United States is genuinely committed to a sustained opening of relations between the two countries. Furthermore, it will make efforts toward public diplomacy much easier and more effective. Second, this will serve to complement the previously mentioned step of easing visa restrictions by allowing Iranians to apply for U.S. visas in Tehran. Currently, Iranians that are able to obtain visas must incur the costs and hassle of traveling to the U.S. Consulate in Dubai or Ankara. Third, establishing an interests section will help to further knowledge about a country the U.S. knows surprisingly little about, which will be beneficial in formulating a more effective overall policy toward Iran.

Another important facet of comprehensive dialogue should focus on an easing of economic sanctions and at the very least a lifting of the U.S. embargo. While opinions on the relative effectiveness of sanctions on Iran’s economy are mixed, with many claiming the effects are negligible, one thing is almost certain – in the current global economic climate Iran’s oil-dependent economy is in for tough times.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, if the ultimate objective of sanctions is to weaken the regime, it is safe to say that this has not occurred. In fact, the Islamic Republic is arguably in a better strategic position today than it has been in years. The true victims in all of this are the average Iranian citizens, and if we are to support a strengthening of civil society in Iran then we must take into account how strategies aimed at modifying the regime’s behavior ultimately affect the people. As McFaul, Milani and Diamond assert, broad economic

---

<sup>33</sup> Abbas Milani, “U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future of Democracy in Iran,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2005.

<sup>34</sup> See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Tough Times Ahead for the Iranian Economy,” The Brookings Institution, April 2009.

sanctions “hurt the very people the West is trying to empower.”<sup>35</sup>

By opening the door for increased foreign investment and trade relations, the U.S. would be helping to establish greater private sector contacts between the two countries. Additionally, over the long-term, greater economic ties can help to create jobs and boost Iran’s middle class; thus strengthening its chances for a genuine democracy. As Dalia Mogahed points out, “business partnerships that promote economic growth and job creation are important foundations of a thriving middle class and civil society, which are the bedrocks of democracy.”<sup>36</sup>

### People-to-People

Once the government-to-government track is well underway and the steps suggested above have been implemented, the environment should be more conducive to greater civil society interaction. Much of the engagement that will take place on this track will not be considerably different from activities already occurring; however, they should be much more robust and independent from government involvement and obstruction. Nonetheless, as institutional barriers are deconstructed, challenges to establishing contacts will still remain. Therefore, facilitation of dialogue on this level will be an area in which the Iranian diaspora will be especially helpful.<sup>37</sup> With long-held cultural and familial ties to Iran, they will be a vital component of building people-to-people relations.

Cultural and educational exchanges provide a valuable opportunity to reinforce democratic principles and allow greater understanding between the two countries. Exposure to the rich and diverse Iranian and American cultures will be essential in fostering mutual understanding and respect and can occur through international exchanges of musicians, artists, writers, filmmakers, and athletes. Privately-funded scholarships and research grants, along with broader academic programming such as workshops and conferences should be used to attract Iranian academics, students, and human rights activists. Student

---

<sup>35</sup> Michael McFaul, Abbas Milani, and Larry Diamond, “A Win-Win U.S. Strategy for Dealing with Iran,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2006-2007.

<sup>36</sup> Dalia E. Mogahed, “Engaging With Muslim Communities Around the World,” Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, February 26, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, “Hamyaran: The Iranian NGO Resource Center – An Interview with Baquer Namazi,” *GSC Quarterly* 10, Fall 2003.

organizations on university campuses throughout the U.S. can work to actively engage the vibrant student movement within Iran. Efforts should also focus on mobilizing public opinion within the United States – educating the broader population about the democratic movement in Iran and the numerous violations of human rights at the hands of the regime. By drumming up international support for imprisoned activists and journalists while at the same time working to reintegrate Iran into the international community, the regime will have a harder time getting away with such practices.

Interaction between American and Iranian NGOs is also a vital component of people-to-people contact. This should include not only a sharing of ideas and experiences but also involve on-the-ground training that boosts organizational structure, broadens methods of advocacy and outreach, and strengthens a network of like-minded domestic NGOs. American professional associations and labor unions should also work to engage their counterparts in Iran to help strengthen their ability to secure members' rights so that their professions can flourish.

All of this cannot be achieved without sufficient attention and public awareness, and this is one area of people-to-people contact where the U.S. government may play a role. The government can facilitate people-to-people dialogue without becoming too directly involved in the process itself simply by educating the American public, NGOs, and business community about the needs of Iranian civil society, steps being taken by the government to open relations, and opportunities in which Iranian expatriates and Americans can help.

## **LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE**

The Islamic Republic and the United States have reached a critical juncture in their turbulent relationship; while there is a clear opportunity for progress there is also a significant danger of missteps and mixed signals. As they work to overcome thirty years of mutual mistrust and hostility, there will surely be setbacks. There will also be individuals and institutions on both sides that seek to sabotage any progress.<sup>38</sup> For these reasons it is absolutely critical for the new administration to formulate a clear, coherent, and transparent policy

---

<sup>38</sup> See Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran: Is Productive Engagement Possible?" Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2008.



toward Iran. In a world where security interests often trump human rights, the U.S. must make every effort to ensure that it will not abandon the Iranian people to ensure better relations with their government. Indeed it has become all too clear that a democratic Iran, though a long-term goal, is in the strategic interests of the United States. Since the best chance of a democratic Iran can be found within Iranians themselves, the most sensible policy of engagement should carve out a significant role for them in the process.

Iranian society is in transition, possessing many fundamental elements of democracy while at the same time struggling with restrictive laws and a repressive regime. Yet, its very ability to endure these hardships and maintain, indeed progress, its democratic principles is a remarkable tribute to every Iranian who seeks the right to live under the laws of their own choosing. Iran's young, vibrant, well-educated population has the potential to cultivate the seeds of democracy, but it must be given the space to do so. In charting a course based on listening and mutual respect, President Obama should heed the words of those he is trying to empower, leaving civil society development to the people themselves while encouraging their government to allow the room to do so.