

U.S.–IRANIAN RELATIONS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN IRAN

This article assumes that the U.S. is intent on the democratization of the Middle East, and at this stage places a priority to Iran. However, it should be noted that instead of promoting current democratic trends within Iran, the U.S. favors enforcement strategies which support the opposition to the regime. The author argues that the U.S. should be working towards more gradual transformation within the existing system instead of working with progressive elements of the regime

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In his State of Union Address in February 2005, U.S. President George W. Bush called on the Iranian people to stand against their state's regime. He pledged U.S. support if the Iranian people would do so.¹ The new U.S. approach towards the Middle East reflected in this speech is based on a resolve to "bring democracy to the Middle East" within the framework of the Greater Middle East Project and "to promote peace and stability in the broader Middle East." The U.S. considers the lack of democracy in Middle Eastern countries as the primary cause of terrorism, especially after 11 September 2001.

This article assumes that the U.S. wants to democratize the Middle East, and in particular, Iran. Of course, whether the U.S. is sincere in its policies with regard to Iran is questionable, but this is the subject of another study.² The U.S. approach is problematic because it degrades the progress Iran has made towards democracy. Instead of promoting current democratic trends within the Iranian regime, the U.S. favors enforcement strategies supporting opposition to the regime. This may culminate in sectarianism and greater troubles not only in Iran, but also in the greater Middle East.

This article argues that Iran has been on the way to democratization for a long time, although there is still room for significant improvement. Furthermore, if Iran improves democratic practices inside the country, it could be seen as a model for other Middle Eastern countries looking to merge democracy and Islam. However, the current U.S. approach damages the ongoing struggle for democracy in Iran. By reviewing the lessons it learned from its experience with the 1953 coup d'état against the Mosaddeq in Iran³ the U.S. should refrain from any kind of intervention and give up its provocative discourse by adopting a "critical engagement" policy.

The Struggle for Democracy in Iran

No where does "the development of democratic ideals and principles," for instance, the expansion of universal respect for the political and civil rights of individuals, occur overnight only but over decades and sometimes even centuries. The development of such rights in the West itself, where modern democracy first emerged, has taken centuries to reach its present state, one in which political democracy is equated with freedom. Even more importantly, the expansion of political and civil rights has been the result of struggle and competition among

¹ See George W. Bush, *The State of the Union, 2005*: "Today, Iran remains the world's primary state sponsor of terror - pursuing nuclear weapons while depriving its people of the freedom they seek and deserve. We are working with European allies to make clear to the Iranian regime that it must give up its uranium enrichment program and any plutonium reprocessing, and end its support for terror. And to the Iranian people, I say tonight: As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you." available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>. □

² It can be argued that the U.S. not only wants to see a democratic government in Iran but also it wants to see a regime friendly to the U.S. Moreover, apart from the U.S. "ideal politics" towards Iran, its geopolitical considerations also should be taken into account. For such an analysis see Michael T. Klare "Oil, Geopolitics, and the Coming War with Iran," available at: <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=2312>. □□□□

³ Barry Rubin, "Lessons from Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No.3, pp.105-115.

contending groups in society (e.g., labor, women, minorities) for political power and socioeconomic resources. The struggle for democracy in Iran should also be analyzed within this broader context.⁴

Iran has had three important political movements towards democracy in the twentieth century. A coalition consisting largely of progressive *ulama*, *bazaaris* and intellectuals forced the *Qajar Shah* to enact a constitution and to establish a Parliament in 1906. The second dramatic political movement was the nationalist movement of 1951-53, when the Iranian Parliament nationalized the country's oil and asserted its constitutional power over the monarch. And finally, there was the popular revolution of 1979, which overthrew the Iranian monarchy and established a republican form of government. Since 1979, the struggle for democracy in Iran has continued within the framework of an Islamic Republic.⁵

An internal struggle within the coalition that carried out the revolution of 1979 resulted in the Islamist faction rising to power. The victors insisted on calling the revolution an Islamic Revolution. However, the "Islamic" Revolution of 1979 did not give a birth to a theocratic regime. Rather, it defined the new regime as an Islamic Republic. That is, the Islamic republic legitimized itself by attributing its power to religion and popular vote. By doing this, it tried to create a model merging Islamism and Republicanism.⁶

The state was characterized by three ideological dimensions, namely the religious, the populist/democratic, and revolutionary/ radical. For this reason, the Islamic Republic is comprised of institutions that embody and fulfill all three features. As a contemporary modern state, the Islamic Republic has a constitution and three branches of government –executive, legislative, and judiciary. However, as Mahdi Moslem, one of the leading scholars on Iranian politics, argued, republicanism is "only one aspect of the extremely multifaceted nature of its statehood" and "In the Islamic Republic, the central government is not the sole source for initiating, making, and implementing laws and policies in the country..." Moreover, "ignoring the principles of separation of politics and equality before the law, the Iranian Constitution enables some institutions legally to override or to challenge the decisions and policies of other institutions that are considered of secondary importance within the state hierarchy." According to the Constitution, religious supervisory bodies such as the Council of Guardians, Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council constitute the first set of institutions, in the

⁴ Ali Abootalebi, "Iran's Struggle for Democracy Continues: An Evaluation of Twenty-Five Years after the Revolution," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.8, No.2 (June 2004). □□□□

⁵ Nasser Momayezi, "Islam and Democratic Movement in Iran," *International Studies*, Vol. 38, No.4 (October December 2001), pp.341-361. □□□□□□

⁶ Nevertheless, the Shiite Feqh and Jafari sects of Islam are taken as the basis for the Constitution and the Islamic Republic, which excludes, to some extent, non-Shiites. In spite of the exclusion of non-Shiites, the "pluralist" understanding of Islam that has been devised by the new Islamist intellectuals could make it easier to embrace other sects and facilitate further democratization. For instance see, Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (eds.), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford University Press, 2000.)

hierarchy of political institutions.⁷ Republican institutions, the executive, the legislative and the judiciary bodies are in the second rank of the institutional hierarchy. The third set of institutions in Iran is the revolutionary organs accountable only to the Leader of the Revolution.⁸

At the top of the power hierarchy, there is the Leader of the Revolution, who should be a *mojtahed*, which is a high level religious scholar who has the ability to interpret religious texts, elected by the Assembly of Experts. Members of the Assembly of Experts are elected in popular, nation-wide elections from among senior scholars of Shia religious law who have been approved as candidates by the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council is composed of twelve religious and lay lawyers. Six religious lawyers are directly appointed by the Leader. The other six lay lawyers are chosen by Parliament from among a list of legal experts proposed by the head of the Judiciary. Head of the Judiciary should be a *mojtahed* as well, and appointed by the Leader. Members of the Parliament are elected directly by people, one deputy of each of 290 electoral districts; candidates for election must be approved by the Guardian Council.⁹ Thereby, the Iranian people vote every four years in separate elections for a new Parliament, a new president, local councils, and the Council of Experts, the body of senior clergy responsible for choosing the *faqih*.

This complex web of relations among institutions in Iran which relegates republican institutions to a secondary rank taints the prospect of democracy in Iran in the Western sense. Nevertheless, the struggle for democracy in Iran is ongoing. The government in Iran is not monolithic; “the political elite – an alliance of politically active clergy and lay technocrats who consolidated power between 1979 and 1981 - hold varying views on the cultural, economic, political, security, and social issues that have confronted Iran since the revolution.”¹⁰ A consideration of the nature of the Islamic government and the functions of the Islamic state, reveal two competing mainstream orientations in Iran since the inception of the Islamic Republic, which are characterized as elitist and populist. According to the elitist perspective, ultimate sovereignty in an Islamic government belongs to God; and “God’s representatives for implementing divine laws and deriving new legislation from them ought to be those trained as experts in the canons of religious law, that is, the clergy.” According to the populist perspective, political sovereignty in an Islamic government is based on consensual contract among citizens. Citizens may transfer their sovereign rights to elected representatives, who then are authorized to enact legislation on behalf of the community.

Following the Islamists’ consolidation of their power in the early 1980s, “opposition”

⁷ The list also consists the Representatives of the *vali-ye faqih*, Association of Friday Prayer Leaders, Special Court for the Clergy, and the Islamic Associations. □□□□□□

⁸ Mehdi Moslem, “The State and Factional Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in Eric Hooglund (ed.), *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution, Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2002) pp. 24-28. □□□□□□

⁹ English translation of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is available at: ; see also, Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of the Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington DC.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy- Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2000.) □□□□□□

¹⁰ Eric Hooglund, “Khatami’s Iran,” *Current History*, Vol.98, No.625 (February 1999), p.59.

to the Islamic Republic was very weak. There were two reasons for the weakness of the opposition: the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and the war which broke out between Iran and Iraq. The war provided the regime with “unquestionable authority.” Most of the movements in the political scene were repressed, or some of them, like the Mujahedeen Khalq Organization, became alienated and began a struggle completely in opposition to the regime. At that time, political competition revolved around the elitist and the populist factions, both of which were supportive of Khomeini, the revolution, and the idea of an Islamic government. Despite the competition between the elitist and populist factions throughout the 1980s, the political scene in Iran remained relatively stagnant because Khomeini mediated between the competing institutions and maintained a balance between the rival factions.

Following the death of Khomeini, differences between these rival factions “have intensified to the extent that ideological discord among the governing elite has become the most salient feature of politics in the Islamic Republic.”¹¹ Hence, the end of the war with Iraq in July 1988 and the death of Khomeini in 1989 gave rise to a new phase of political mobility. The disillusionment of a substantial segment of the Iranian society with government policies and the regime’s inclination towards authoritarianism, as well as changes in world politics have also contributed to this political mobility.¹²

Domestic pressure to reform revolutionary policies can be attributed to three things. First, the revolutionary regime in Iran could not originally extend “freedom” to people because of the war with Iraq, the process of consolidating power in the regime and eliminating counter-revolutionaries. Touching upon this topic, Ayatollah Montazeri, one of the leading clerics during the revolution and influential in the founding of the revolutionary state said, “We desired independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic, but the mullahs forgot the freedom part.”¹³ Indeed, after years of waiting, people could no longer tolerate martial law and demanded transformation. The second reason for the demand for reform in Iran was that the Iranian people became aware of the fact that constant confrontation with regional and international powers gained Iran nothing. Finally, the presence of a large youth population, born after the revolution, played a role. The young community strongly reacted to “revolutionary despotism” and demanded social and cultural rights and freedoms. Their main concern was not to export the revolution, to liberate oppressed people or to construct an Islamic system all over the world, but to find a job and to solve their economic and social problems. They desired more liberty in social life and integration into the international community.¹⁴

¹¹ Moslem (2002), p.20. □□□□□□

¹² Momayezi (2001), pp.348-61; See also Anaoushiavan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini; the Iranian Second Republic* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995). □□□□□□

¹³ *Radikal*, 22 February 2000. □□□□□□

¹⁴ Shireen Hunter, “Is Iranian Perestroika Possible without Fundamental Change?” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol.21, No.4 (Autumn 1998), pp.23-42.; and see Robin Wright, “Iran’s New Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.79, No.1, (January-February 2000), pp.133-45.; Oliver Roy and Farhad Khorosrokhavar, *Iran; Bir Devrimin Tikenifi*, (trans. Ismail Yerguz), (Istanbul: Metis Yayınlar, 2001).

Moreover, the domestic pressure for transformation extended to questioning the legitimacy of the *velayat-e fakih* rule in the Islamic Republic. Failure of the Islamic regime to fulfill the economic and social expectations of the masses caused them to question the validity of the of *velayat-e fakih*.¹⁵□

These difficulties led to the ascendancy of pragmatists/reformists in Iranian politics and increasing competition between the reformists and conservatives, which characterized the 1990s in Iran. This fierce competition also caused “political deadlock” in Iran. For instance, in the last Parliamentary elections held in February 2004, the Guardian Council vetoed more than one third of the eight thousand applicants for candidacy in the elections. Leading political figures like Mohammad Reza Khatami, Mohsen Mirdamadi, and Elaha Koolayee, the forerunners of the reformist movement, were among those vetoed.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this was not the first crisis between the Parliament and the Guardian Council. Ayatollah Khomeini was a natural mediator when disagreements between the parliament and the Guardian council arose. Following the death of Khomeini, the Expediency Council, whose members are also directly appointed by the Leader, was set up in order to mediate between the two institutions.

In order to overcome this deadlock, President Khatami proposed “twin bills.” Khatami once said, “Although the President is responsible for implementing the constitution, he, however, does not possess the minimum powers afforded to the presidency by the constitution.” One of the bills aimed to reform the election law eliminating /or reducing the Guardian Council’s power of “approbatory supervision” through which the council rejects candidates for elected office. The second bill, which would enhance presidential authority, would give the President the right to warn, even punish, officials in the executive, legislative or judicial branches. However, these twin bills were vetoed by the Guardian Council and Khatami withdrew them from the parliament upon the conservative block’s “victory” in parliamentary elections.¹⁷

In February 2004, some reformist groups, led by the Hezb-e Mosharakate Islami boycotted the elections.¹⁸ Despite the call for boycott voter turn-out was about fifty percent. Conservative candidates won more than 170 of the 290 seats in the Parliament. Yet, despite the decrease in the numbers of the MPs, the elections did not spell defeat for reformists.

¹⁵ Buchta (2000), pp.86-102.; <smail Safa Üstün, *Hümeyni'den Hamaney'e İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Yönetim Biçimi*, (İstanbul: Birleşik Yayıncılık, 1999); Rufen Çakır and Sami Ouz, *Hatemi'nin İran* ', (İstanbul: İletifim, 2000.) Indeed, the theory was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s and 1970s and applied to the state structure of revolutionary Iran. However, some members of the ulema like Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Ayatollah Khoi never accepted this theory. On the other hand, some members of the clergy including Ayatollah Montazeri, who played leading roles in the revolution and the foundation of the state, became critical of the theory of *velayat-i fakih* because their expectations never materialized. □

¹⁶ Hüseyin Bağcı and Bayram Sinkaya, “İran’da Demokratikleşme Rüzgarları mı?” *Zaman*, 25 January 2004; See also Sami Ouz, “İran’da Monarşist Dalgasının Yükselişi,” *Birikim* (Mayıs 2004). □□□□

¹⁷ A. William Samii, “Dissent in Iranian Elections: Reasons and Implications,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol.58, No.3 (Summer 2004), pp.415-417. □□□□□□

¹⁸ Although Ayatollah Ali Khamenei asked the Governing Council to revise its decision twice, the Council refused to reverse its decision. In spite of the fact that it allowed approximately one thousand candidates, the Guardian Council did not accept the deputies that had already been vetoed. Upon the Guardian Council’s insistence on its decision, some reformist groups decided to boycott the elections.

It should be kept in mind that the reformist camp is not monolithic within itself. It is composed of a series of groups ranging from moderate Islamists to secular ones. Differences among the reformist political groups surfaced after the presidential elections of 2001. They could not even agree on lists to be proposed in the elections for local councils in March 2003. Similarly, reformist groups cannot adopt a common stance regarding the veto crisis, while some of them boycotted the February 2004 elections, others participated in the race. Contrary to *Hezb-e Mosharakate Islami* that defined the elections as “a democracy-burning ceremony,” the *Mejmaeye Rohaniyyun* and *Mujahedeen-e Engkhelabe Eslami* parties argued that “boycotting the elections would only benefit the conservatives.” □

Another reason for the erosion of the reformist movement is the disruption of relations between the reformist elites and the people, an important point underlined by Abdullah Ramazanzadeh.¹⁹ While, the leaders of the reformist movement had favored a transformation that is “gradual, peaceful and within the system”, the people demand an “urgent and thorough” transformation of the system. That is why students did not take part in the election campaigns, and those members of the Parliament who went on strike when the crises began were ostracized. A third reason for the attrition in the reformist movement was its failure to improve the economic conditions of people. Despite relative improvements in politics, social and cultural life, economic issues were of secondary importance. As a result, those pragmatists and conservatives, whose main agenda was the economy and who pledged economic prosperity became victorious in the parliamentary elections held in February 2004.

Finally, security issues have been the top priority of Iranian elites for the past four years, and this in turn has strengthened the conservatives. “International events beyond Iran’s control further pushed security issues to the top of the agenda. The U.S. “war on terror” and the presence of American troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq, along with Washington’s talk of “regime change” in Tehran, made the survival and security of the Islamic Republic the principal preoccupation of the elites. This change in priorities was also evident in Khatami’s agenda, who talked less about reform and more about security issues in the past three years than during his first term in office.”²⁰

Despite the attrition it has suffered, because the social and political conditions that gave birth to the reformist movement have not changed remarkably, the movement can be expected to remedy the situation rapidly. It is expected that a pragmatist candidate could win the presidential elections to be held in June 2005. If a pragmatist president focuses on economic issues and integrates Iran into the global market, and is also able to jumpstart dialogue with the U.S., this would empower reformists in Iran. Even if pragmatists achieve economic improvement,

¹⁹ *Iran*, 23 May 2003. □□□□□□ □

²⁰ Mohsen M. Milani, “Iran, the Status quo Power,” *Current History*, Vol.104, No.678 (January 2005), p.31; See also Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Pragmatism in the Midst of Iranian Turmoil,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.4, pp.33-56.

because they do not have an agenda that includes “reforms” on a social, cultural and political level, the Iranian people will give one more chance to the reformists in the short term. Reformists may return in the coming parliamentary elections to be held in 2008.

U.S.-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of September 11th

U.S. President George W. Bush identified Iran as the third member of an “axis of evil” alongside Iraq and North Korea in his State of the Union address in January 2002. He said, “Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom ... They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred ... The U.S. will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”²¹ Bush’s depiction of Iran as part of a “axis of evil” slammed the door shut on any chance of détente between the U.S. and Iran that might have emerged following Bush’s entrance to the White House and Iran’s adoption of a collaborative stance throughout the U.S.-led operation against Afghanistan under the Taliban.²² This step, coupled with an increasingly strong U.S. military presence around Iran, caused Iran to feel surrounded. Designation of Iran as a part of the “axis of evil” was a huge blow to the reformists in Iran. Reformists and conservatives were united in defending Iran and criticized Bush’s statement. In May 2002, the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami summarized the Iranian stance adopted by almost all factions, “as long as they [U.S.] are threatening, insulting and humiliating us, neither myself, nor the nation is ready to accept relations of any kind.”²³□

The war against Iraq and Afghanistan might have a two fold effect on Iranian politics. On the one hand, it could harden the position of anti-U.S. conservatives in Iran if the U.S.-led forces emerge as Iraq’s liberators; Iran’s push for democratic reforms are likely to be reinvigorated. Reformists have tried to use the situation to their advantage, claiming that the danger posed by the U.S. can only be countered by the “decisive support and active participation of the people”, which cannot be achieved unless there is democracy at home.²⁴ This argument was crystallized in two major public letters. The first was signed by around 200 leading intellectuals, who warned: “We are deeply worried that the continuation of the present policies, carried out by unelected men, are taking us to a point of no return. We must learn a lesson from the fate of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and understand that despotism and selfishness is destined to carry the country to defeat.” The second letter was addressed to the Supreme Leader and was signed

²¹ George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address 2002*, Washington DC., 29 January 2002, available at ; Nabi Sonboli, “Iran va Amreka pas az 11 September: az Eetelaf taa Barkhord,” *Negah*, Vol.3, No.21 (April 2002), p.30. □

²² Gawdat Baghat, “Iran, the U.S., and the War on Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.26, No.2 (March-April 2003); Garry Sick, “Iran: Confronting Terrorism,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.26, No.4 (Autumn 2003); Bahman Baktiari, “Iranian Foreign Policy” *Middle East Policy*, Vol.9, No.4 (December 2002). □

²³ Baghat (2003) pp.98-100; Baktiari (2002) p.79. □□□□□

²⁴ *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol.6, No.14, 31 March 2003.

by 127 reformist parliamentary deputies. They urged the Leader to intervene to unblock the stalled reform process, called for a referendum on reform as well as comprehensive review of relations with the U.S.

On the other hand, invoking national security concerns posed by war and the U.S. presence along Iran's border could harm reformists by characterizing them as pro-American. For the conservatives, this line of argument comes close to treason. They argued that the nation must lay aside any differences and band together to repel the foreign menace.²⁵ The result was the backlash of conservatives in the parliamentary elections of 2004.

Additionally, the U.S. has accused Iran of producing weapons of mass destruction, and undermining the Middle East peace process by harboring terrorist organizations. U.S. officials have been arguing that Iran poses a threat to its national interests.²⁶ Echoing charges that were used to justify the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said he supports a policy of regime change in Iran, saying that Iran is harboring al-Qaeda members and developing nuclear weapons.²⁷ The conservative magazine "the Weekly Standard" has asserted that we [the U.S.] must now "take the fight to Iran". The project of the New American Century, which has affiliations with many key administration officials, wrote an open letter to Bush just after 11 September. The letter strongly urged the President to pursue a "war on terror", invade Afghanistan, alienate Yasser Arafat, attack Iraq, and target Iran.²⁸

In fact, U.S. charges against Iran and such an "assertive" approach is not new to US-Iranian relations. However, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq suddenly makes the situation more serious. The Clinton administration's "dual containment policy" that aimed to contain Iraq and Iran has been transformed into containment that focuses only on Iran. Besides containment, the U.S. is trying to increase pressure on Iran both from the inside and outside. The most preminent tool of outside pressure is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear technology. Iran has been pursuing a nuclear program and argues that it has the right to produce "peaceful nuclear energy" in accordance with the NPT. However, the U.S. has accused Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons. Based on the claim that Iran has been developing nuclear weapons, the U.S. is trying to convince the international community to increase pressure on Iran.²⁹

In order to pressure Iran from the inside, the U.S. has two influential tools. The

²⁵ *Middle East International*, 13 June 2003, p.24; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.26., No.4 (Autumn 2003). □□□□□

²⁶ See www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/2030313-9.html; *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol.6, No.13, 24 March 2003.

²⁷ Alistair Millar, "Next Stop, Iran?," available at:www.iranexpert.com/2003/nextstopiran15december.htm □

²⁸ *Ibid.* □□□□□□□□

²⁹ Bayram Sinkaya, "İran Nükleerde Köfleye Sokuldu" (Iran was Pressured on Nuclear), Liberal Düşünce Topluluğu, (October 2003) available at:http://www.liberal-dt.org.tr/guncel/Diger/bs_nukler.htm.

U.S. still has not disbanded MKO militias based in Iraq, an armed group fighting against the Islamic Republic, and holds it to use as leverage against Iran.³⁰ In addition, the U.S. thinks that the Iranian people, most of whom are assumed to be disillusioned, would side with the U.S. in the event that there was U.S. “intervention” in Iran.³¹ It is argued that the conservative backlash has all but wiped out the reformist movement which could liberalize the regime and make it accountable to the Iranian populace.³² Given the increasing number of disillusioned people, seventy percent of whom are below the age of thirty and are living in severe economic conditions, it is assumed that they would rise up against the regime. Hence, the U.S. President has urged the Iranian people to rise up against the regime in Iran and pledges to side with them.

In accordance with this framework, U.S. interest in Iranian domestic politics has increased recently. It is alleged that the State Department is looking for democratic organizations or activists to support. Meanwhile, Iranian opposition groups are soliciting U.S. support. Pursuant to a 3 million USD Congressional appropriation, the U.S. State Department is soliciting proposals from “educational institutions, humanitarian groups, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals inside Iran to support the advancement of democracy and human rights.” It is also argued that the U.S. government already spends approximately 15 million USD per year on Persian-language broadcasting to Iran.³³ Moreover, a bill dubbed the Iran Freedom Support Act has been introduced to the House of Representatives. The bill defines its purpose as “to hold the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behavior and to support a transition to democracy in Iran.” The legislation calls on the White House to support pro-democracy forces that oppose the Iranian regime.³⁴ Opponents of the Iranian regime -under the umbrella of the National Convention for a Democratic Secular Republic in Iran- met in Washington on April 14, 2005 to demand U.S. support for their activities.³⁵ □

The U.S. strategy of containing Iran and increasing pressure on it has not worked well. Containing and isolating Iran would increase security concerns not only in

³⁰ It has been a real dilemma for the Americans to deal with the *Mujaheden-e Khalq Organisation* (MKO), a highly disciplined armed force committed to fighting against the Iranian regime and based in Iraq since 1986. The MKO has been listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department since 1997— apparently in hopes of encouraging a dialogue with Iran’s then newly-elected president, Khatami. Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson, argued that maintaining the MKO “as an organized group in separate camps in Iraq offers an excellent way to intimidate and gain leverage over Tehran ... to deter the mullahs from taking hostile steps, supporting terrorism against coalition troops in Iraq, building nuclear weapons”; “Iran, Friend or Foe?,” *The Middle East*, (July 2003), pp.16-17. □□□□

³¹ Patrick Clawson also refers to a poll published in *Yas-e Now* daily on 22 June 2003. According to that poll, “45 percent – of the questioners-- chose change in the political system, even with foreign intervention.” However, according to evidence produced by another poll “only 10.7 percent of the respondents said that the current situation was satisfactory. A resounding 66.2 percent believed the current situation could be improved with a few changes, while the remaining 23.1 percent felt that fundamental change was needed;” See Nazgol Ashouri, “Polling in Iran: Surprising Questions,” *Policy Watch*, No.757, 14 May 2003. □□□□□□

³² Ray Takeyh, “Iran: from Reform to Revolution,” *Survival*, Vol.46, No.1 (Spring 2004), pp.131-44. □

³³ *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol. 8, No. 17, 25 April 2005. □□□□□□

³⁴ For the text of the proposed bill see:<http://www.theorator.com/bills109/hr282.html>. □□□□

³⁵ *RFE/RL Iran Report*, Vol. 8, No. 17 (April 25, 2005). See <http://www.2005nationalconvention.org>.

the Iranian regime, but also among the people. Continuing to impose heavy sanctions on Iran will cause a deterioration of the Iranian economy which will empower conservatives and cause a “militarization” of Iranian politics. Additionally, there is no opposition organization inside or outside the regime which has the capacity to take over with the exception of the reformists. However, “provocative and interventionist” discourse from the U.S. could deal a heavy blow to the reformist movement in Iran. A strategy aimed at overthrowing the Iranian regime with military force would result in heavy losses. The best way to democratize Iran is to establish a critical dialogue with upcoming pragmatist-conservative leaders, thereby opening the way for reforms and liberalization.