

Empower Iran's opposition forces

Maryam Rajavi International Herald Tribune
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Checking the mullahs

PARIS How should the world deal with the challenges posed by the Iranian regime, with its continuing support for terrorism, increasing meddling in Iraq and relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons? Approaches under debate range from engagement, with the hope of empowering the "moderates," to military invasion. But the best option is to initiate change through the Iranian people and the organized resistance movement.

There is no need for war; no one would want to see an Iraq II played out in Iran. But engagement, which has shaped policy toward Iran on both sides of the Atlantic for two decades, has been a disaster, strengthening the most radical factions of the ruling theocracy.

The failure to isolate a religious dictatorship bent on spreading its fiery brand of Islamic fundamentalism and acquiring nuclear weapons has led to the current stalemate. Now Tehran's missiles, capable of bearing weapons of mass destruction, can reach eastern and southern Europe.

No concession is going to dissuade the mullahs from continuing their ominous objectives. Only days after Tehran signed an agreement with Britain, France and Germany to temporarily suspend its uranium enrichment activities, Iran's powerful former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, boasted, "Tehran is set to be a member of the nuclear club soon and will resume enrichment after a maximum of six months."

The engagement policy failed even to keep President Mohammad Khatami and his camp, dubbed as moderate in the West, viable. Today, the most extreme faction dominates the political establishment, and the Revolutionary Guards control most levers of power, including the Parliament.

But there is another answer: democracy.

The more than a thousand students who shouted antigovernment slogans during a speech by Khatami at Tehran University last month are evidence that Iranians seek a change in the totality of the regime.

As a first step in that direction, Western governments must not assist the ruling theocracy. And that means removing the terrorist tag that has been put on the People's Mujahedeen Organization. The group is the pivotal force in the largest Iranian opposition coalition, the National Council of Resistance, which has revealed Tehran's nuclear, missile and terrorist plans.

In 1997, the U.S. State Department placed the People's Mujahedeen on the list of foreign terrorist organizations as a goodwill gesture to Khatami, who was Iran's new president. But after a 16-month investigation in Iraq, where the group has had a presence on the Iranian frontier for 18 years, the United States determined that its members were "protected persons under the Fourth Geneva Convention" and that there was no basis to charge any of them.

Over the years, many U.S. Congressmen and their counterparts in Europe, citing the group's widespread popular and religious roots in Iran, have described the People's Mujahedeen as a legitimate resistance movement and the antithesis to Islamic fundamentalism, stressing that it should be removed from the terror list. In November, the International Conference of Jurists, a convention of 500 human-rights lawyers in Paris, declared that blacklisting the organization was a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, the fundamental right to defense and the presumption of innocence.

The Iranian resistance is committed to holding free and fair elections within six months of regime change, to electing a constituent assembly and handing over affairs to the people's elected representatives. It seeks a peaceful Iran without weapons of mass destruction, on good terms with its neighbors and dedicated to friendship with the world community.

More than fifty years after the coup that toppled the elected government of Mohammed Mossadegh, fate has again put America at a historic crossroads. This time, unlike in 1953, the United States must identify itself with the Iranian people and their aspirations for freedom, democracy and a secular state. Only such an approach can guarantee lasting peace and stability in the Middle East.

(Maryam Rajavi is president of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.)