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"America and the Iranian Political Reform Movement: First, do No Harm"

House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
2172 Rayburn House Office Building
February 3, 2010, 2:00 – 4:00 PM

The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia held a hearing to address the prospects of developing U.S. policy tools that will avoid harming Iran's opposition movement. Four witnesses provided expert testimony: **Geneive Abdo**, Director of the Iran Program at The Century Foundation; **Mehdi Khalaji**, Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy; **Fariborz Ghadar**, Distinguished Scholar and Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies; and **J. Scott Carpenter**, Keston Family Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Subcommittee Chairman **Gary Ackerman** (D-CA) opened the hearing by affirming that the first obligation of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran is to "do no harm." The administration's second obligation, according to the congressman, is to recognize that "we are not a doctor, and Iran is not a patient. It is natural and right for us to want to support the opposition, but the question is how?"

Ackerman then yielded his time to Congressman **Dan Burton** (R-IN), who chastised the **Obama** Administration for its "naïve approach that squandered a chance for real political change" after last summer's elections. Congressman **Keith Ellison** (D-MN) dismissed Burton's premise that a more active and rhetorically supportive policy would have produced positive results. While he maintained that it's important to show concern for the welfare and human rights of those in Iran, Ellison felt it's equally necessary to be cognizant of the United States' troubled history with Iran and how that has affected Iranian views of American foreign policy intentions.

Congressman **Dana Rohrabacher** (R-CA) delivered an impassioned plea for action, saying that "the time of patience is over, long over. We should have been engaged in a very active way a long time ago." He advocated what he termed a "**Ronald Reagan**" approach toward Iran; unequivocal and explicit support for the opposition movement. Congressman **Jeff Fortenberry** (R-NE) echoed his republican colleagues' criticism of Obama's approach, saying that Tehran now doubts the collective resolve of world powers. Similarly, Congressman **Edward Royce** (R-CA) criticized Obama for the inability to "see things as they are right now in Iran." Further, he claimed that "Obama hasn't committed the needed resources to encourage full-on change. He seems intent on a regime-centered approach."

Mehdi Khalaji delivered the first witness testimony, relaying the reform movement's collective belief that "democracy is not a gift from others, but rather an internal effort of a people to emancipate itself from tyranny and realize its dream of justice, freedom, and national sovereignty." However, this does not absolve the outside world from any responsibility; **Khalaji believes the interests of the international community and the democratic interests of the Iranians are "in confluence."**

Further, peace in the region and democracy in Iran seem inseparable, he claimed, and the international community needs to apply pressure on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to weaken the pillars of the military government.

Geneive Abdo followed Khalaji with a statement about the lasting power of the opposition movement and its impact on the perceived "sanctity" of **Ayatollah Khamenei** and the Islamic Republic. "In the eyes of many Iranians," she said, "Iran is no longer an Islamic state or a republic." In terms of Western interests, however, **she maintained that a strong opposition movement provides the U.S. and its allies with substantial leverage against the Iranian regime**, which is why it's important that the U.S. assist those who seek reform. Significantly, the movement is no longer restricted to street protesters – it now includes many religious Iranians who have historically supported both Khamenei and the state's heavy-handed Islamic policies. In terms of concrete tools, **Abdo advocated an external investigation, perhaps via the UN Human Rights Council, to reveal and document the many human rights abuses committed by the Iranian regime**. This would, according to abdo, "cause a lot of Iranians inside Iran to understand that the Islamic Republic is no longer behaving as an Islamic state." Many oppositionists also want the U.S. to provide technical assistance in order to over regime interference and censorship.

Next, **Fariborz Ghadar** spoke and highlighted a few notable trends in recent weeks. Most significantly, a few opposition leaders made "conciliatory moves" which were not reciprocated by Khamenei. Ghadar sees a successful U.S. strategy as one that responds to the aspirations of the Iranian people, which are currently being ignored by the regime. In order to cultivate trust, **the opposition movement must understand that the U.S. will not use them as a chip to be traded away within the context of nuclear negotiations**. Much of the population holds positive views of the U.S. generally, but there is still concern about U.S. foreign policy – particularly the potential for future military attacks or sanctions, neither of which Ghadar believes would be successful in producing positive results. He suggests a massive effort to highlight and broadcast the corruption within the Iranian system; to broadcast Iran's miserable economic performance; and to broadcast the regime's continuing brutality and repression.

J. Scott Carpenter provided the final testimony, relaying his concern that seemingly appropriate, reasonable rhetoric can become an excuse for diplomatic paralysis. "We should take cues from the activists themselves," he said, "allowing those in the trenches to decide whether and how to accept U.S. support." Although the administration was at first understandably wary of the consequences of excessive U.S. involvement, **Carpenter believes it's time for Obama to launch a nuanced, comprehensive offensive to challenge the regime on human rights grounds**. His recommendations fall into three categories: **1) public diplomatic statements; 2) re-engineered and re-emphasized programming; and 3) punitive sanctions**.

Expounding upon those themes, Carpenter called on the administration to publicly plan for the eventuality of a democratic government by preparing the necessary legal groundwork to lift sanctions and remove Iran from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Additionally, the administration should publicly re-launch a revitalized Iran Democracy Fund and bolster the National Endowment for Democracy. Finally, he advocated for a "single tidal wave" of sanctions targeting the IRGC leadership to boost their effectiveness and strengthen their political impact. **Carpenter sees regime change as the best safeguard against a nuclear Iran, and thinks it may even provide for a degree of rapprochement that positively impacts U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan**.

Chairman Ackerman kicked off the question and answer session by asking, "**How do we embrace the Green movement without it becoming the kiss of death?**" Khalaji confirmed that some measures would indeed be very harmful, but countered that economic pressure on the IRGC could help mitigate its hold on power. Abdo added that a heavy emphasis on human rights violations would start to dissolve the regime's traditional base of support. Ghadar advocated calling attention to the regime's pervasive corruption and nepotism. And Carpenter asserted the importance of U.S. policies that put us "squarely on the side of promoting human rights."

Congressman Burton asked for analysis of the impact of sanctions upon the Iranian people – more precisely, how they would affect Iranian attitudes toward the regime. Highlighting the ineffectiveness of "least-common denominator" sanctions, **Carpenter claimed that the opposition movement supported sanctions that are "short, sharp, and shock the system."** The reform movement wants to avoid what happened in Iraq, and Carpenter believes the best way to do this is through swift and targeted economic penalties that affect the ruling elite. Ghadar agreed, adding that sanctions on foreign direct investment is also an effective long-term policy tool. Abdo revealed the opposition's desire for increased funding for civil society, albeit not directly from the United States.

In response to Congressman Ellison's question regarding the consequence of gasoline sanctions, Ghadar doubted the efficacy of that particular approach, predicting that the IRGC would simply turn to the black market. However, he thinks that allowing Iranian students to come to the U.S. would be a significant step forward.

Congressman Rohrabacher appreciated the witness' expert testimony, but rejected the notion that subtlety and nuance are virtues when formulating Iran policy. He called for the administration to strongly go after the Mullah's money – **to identify stolen funds, freeze them, and perhaps put them into a "freedom fund" for the people currently struggling for democracy.**

Congressman Connolly used his time to address the issue of counterproductive policy, and asked the witnesses how the U.S. can reconcile its strategic interest in significant political change with the need for diplomatic sensitivity. Carpenter answered that the regime is already accusing the reformists of being Western pawns, so it may not do further damage if the U.S. chooses to inject itself more substantively. Abdo framed the question around realistic short-term scenarios, the most likely of which she sees as a political compromise to place opposition members in the government. **She believes the forthcoming parliamentary elections may be a barometer for this sort of political reconciliation.** Ghadar agreed, claiming that the opposition leaders may push for political rapprochement behind closed doors, perhaps due to the increasing radicalization of the street demonstrators.