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Putting Tehran on notice

U.S. Should Back Democratic Change in Iran

By Ali Safavi

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi's defiant proclamation at the United Nations that Iran will press on with its nuclear-enrichment program is yet another ominous sign that ruling mullahcracy is hellbent on obtaining the A-bomb. In early April, the Iranian National Council of Resistance revealed Tehran had been digging tunnels close to the Parchin military facility, a suspected nuclear site northeast of the capital, to disguise its nuclear-enrichment activities.

There is also ample evidence that Iran's money, weapons and agents are fanning the flames of insurgency in Iraq. Tehran has spent some \$4 billion in Iraq since the ouster of Saddam Hussein and has 40,000 Iraqi operatives on its payroll.

The Iranian regime is keen on using Iraq as a springboard to spread its fundamentalist brand of Islam throughout the entire Middle East. Ahmad Jannati, chairman of Iran's powerful, unelected body known as the Guardian Council, said, "It is the duty of every Muslim to stand against the United States and threaten its interests anywhere." Taking heed, hundreds of suicide volunteers marched in Tehran last month, vowing to attack Americans in Iraq and targets in Israel.

These developments underscore the need for the world community to meet the Iranian challenge -- head-on and without delay.

For more than two decades, the international community has tried to placate the mullahs. While the Europeans, taking the appeasement route, have insisted on an all-carrot approach to tame Tehran's rogue behavior, the United States has offered its own set of incentives, starting with trading arms for hostages in 1985, blacklisting the main Iranian opposition group, the People's Mujahedeen, or PMOI, in 1997, easing the anti-Tehran sanctions in 2000 and bombing PMOI camps during the Iraq war in 2003, despite the group's steering clear of the conflict.

This olive-branch policy has only served to solidify the grip of the most anti-Western wing of the ruling theocracy. With President Mohammad Khatami and his camp out of Iran's political future, some Washington pundits have joined the Europeans in urging the United States to join the nuclear talks with the troglodyte clerics, now dubbed pragmatic conservatives.

It does not take a rocket scientist, however, to realize that no amount of economic and political concessions would bring Iran's hardline rulers around. The likelihood of a moderate state emerging from the ruling theocracy is as remote as that of a leopard changing its spots. The Iranian regime remains the world's worst abuser of human rights, a terrorist state second to none and unwavering in its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

There is a growing consensus that the liberation of Iran is a prerequisite for a nuclear-free Middle East and a stable, democratic Iraq. To achieve this goal, however, there is no need for foreign military intervention. Developments in recent months inside and outside of Iran have made it plain that the corrupt fundamentalists in Iran can be defeated by the men and women they have oppressed for a quarter century.

Last month, virtually every city in the oil-rich province of Khuzistan in southwestern Iran was the scene of a six-day uprising that left at least 62 protesters dead and 1,000 wounded when security forces opened fire, according to media reports. Earlier, Iranians turned the Iran-Japan soccer match into an anti-government rally. Five people were killed in the stampede after security forces tried to quell the unrest. And in late March, Iranian youths used the ancient festival of fire celebrations to vent their anger against the clerics.

In Washington, several members of Congress addressed delegates, representing Iranian-American communities from 40 states across America, in a national convention for a democratic, secular republic in Iran in DAR Constitution Hall April 14. They voiced support for a third option put forth at the European Parliament last December by the Iranian opposition leader Maryam Rajavi: Democratic change through the Iranian people and the organized resistance.

In his State of the Union Address, President Bush told the Iranian people, "As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you." To translate those words into action, the administration should reach out to Tehran's greatest and most feared nemesis, the highly trained People's Mujahedeen. The first step is to end the blacklisting of the group, which a majority in the House and 32 Senators have described as a "legitimate resistance movement."

The timing could not be better, considering that the State Department has recognized its personnel as "protected persons" under the Fourth Geneva Convention and 2.8 million Iraqis have backed this anti-fundamentalist group as the most effective bulwark against Iranian-inspired extremism in Iraq. This would put Tehran on notice that Washington means business and assure the millions who are pursuing democratic change in Iran that America is on their side.

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