
Regime Change in Iran?

Applying George W. Bush's "liberation theology" to the mullahs

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

Though Osama bin Laden, Afghanistan, Israel, and Iraq have commanded our attention since September 11, it is always good to remind ourselves that the most consequential country in the Muslim Middle East is Iran. This has been true, with a few intermissions, for a thousand years. And since the victory of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his revolution in 1979, Iran has held center stage in *the* current Muslim drama: How will God and man interact in a modern theocratic state? Will the Western idea of individual freedom, which has been gaining ground in Iran for over a hundred years, triumph over the Islamic injunction to submit oneself to God's law in virtually all matters public and private? Would the notion of individual rights, always present in the intellectual storm that produced the Iranian revolution, congeal and allow a separation of church and state where the democratic franchise, not the Holy Law or a cleric, becomes the final arbiter of politics? And could the dictatorial dispensation of the entire Muslim Middle East—no democracy except in secular, half-European Turkey—conceivably be shattered by the state whose religious *raison d'être* has been the most explicit?

The Bush administration—and it is perhaps accurate here to underscore, the president himself more than his foreign-policy team—appears to be trying to grapple seriously with an American response to tyranny in the Muslim world, particularly in Iran. The president's "axis of evil" speech, his July 12 address on Iran, the subsequent delivery of this statement in Persian over Voice of America radio by the National Security Council's Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Captive Nations Week proclamation of July 17 have revealed a man who obviously believes that certain Western ideas have universal range and roots. The

president, who is probably the most sincerely religious commander in chief since World War II, has stated repeatedly that faith does not countenance despotism, that Muslims, too, have the right to "liberty and justice . . . the birthright of all people."

Stepping away from the "realist" world of his father—where a vision of regional stability, not a belief in individual liberty and democracy, drove foreign policy—George W. Bush has sliced across national borders and civilizational divides with an unqualified assertion of a moral norm. The president declared, "The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world." America will stand "alongside people everywhere determined to build a world of freedom, dignity, and tolerance. . . . America affirms . . . its commitment to helping those in captive nations achieve democracy." These are, at least to Iranian ears, truly revolutionary words for an American president. One has to go back to Woodrow Wilson to find an American leader who so clearly directs his message far outside the West. And Wilson's call for self-determination, made in the declining years of European empire, addressed collective, "national" ethnic aspirations more than the liberal rights of individuals.

Though the president's "liberation theology" is obviously a work in progress (as, if we remember, was Reagan's), the philosophical borders of the president's views are sufficiently clear that it will be difficult for those in his administration and in the media who are disturbed, if not terrified, by Bush's creed to walk back the policy. They will, no doubt, try. The State Department of Colin Powell will endeavor to introduce a bit of opaqueness into the discussion, striving to keep open the possibility, deeply cherished, it strongly appears, by the director of policy planning, Richard Haass, that U.S. and Iranian officials can somehow sit and talk. For State, sitting and talking with foreign dignitaries is usually an end in itself, imbued with a non-negotiable moral goodness. (Presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer will, of course, have the unenviable

Contributing editor Reuel Marc Gerecht is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

task of articulating the contradictory public truces between State, the Pentagon, and the White House, which will make it appear that the president is trying to alter his original language, if not his intent.) And the president may well be lazy, cautious, or somewhat confused about turning his ideals into a consistent, effective policy. For example, preaching liberty, the rule of law, and democracy for Palestinians on only *one* bank of the Jordan river is an odd, if not unsustainable, rhetorical position. Yet despite the unorthodox, public way foreign policy is being made, and unmade, in this administration, it seems clear that the president isn't going to stop his Reaganesque approach. The possible contradictions in the president's actions are unlikely to blunt the revolutionary edge and appeal of his message in the Middle East.

A quick look at the response in Iran to the president's remarks gives you some idea how powerful liberal ideas are in the modern Middle East. From the "reformists" behind President Mohammad Khatami to the "hard core" behind spiritual leader Ali Khamenei, they are furious. The Iranian parliament passes anti-American, anti-"hegemon" declarations; the "moderates" and the "hard-liners" organize street demonstrations to prove to America and, more important, to themselves, that they cannot be intimidated. They know, even if the Near East Bureau at the State Department does not, that the Iranian people overwhelmingly view clerical rule as fundamentally illegitimate. The heavily Westernized clerics of Iran's religious establishment—and these mullahs are on both sides of the so-called "moderate-conservative" split—know perfectly well that the Persian word *azadi*, "freedom," is perhaps the most evocative word in the language now, and it no longer denotes the idea of national independence, as it did during the revolution. Under the mullahs, *azadi* means personal liberty. Its first political connotation among the people has become, without a doubt, representative democracy unfettered by a paternalistic clerical vanguard (Khatami and friends) or by a more

direct, slightly more mean-spirited dictatorship (Khamenei and company). *Azadi* has also become indissolubly associated with the United States.

To his intellectual credit, Khatami knows that America is currently the driving force of history because, among other things, it is *the* engine of individual liberty, whose centripetal eminence draws to it those who wish to shatter tradition, in other words, the young. The majority of Iran's population is under 20 years of age. They are restless, angry, poor, sexually frustrated, and addicted to the dream, encouraged by the material promises of the revolution, of a better life. Khatami's failure to do much of anything since his election to the presidency in 1997 except talk, often in vague, contradictory language, about greater freedom has further made the case for the United States. Indeed, the political, Westernized clergy like Khatami and Khamenei, who have America on the brain, have become unintentionally America's most eloquent ambassadors in the Islamic Republic.

President Bush's recent decision to take his distance from Foggy Bottom's continuing wish to somehow engage the "moderate" clergy behind Khatami bilaterally will, of course, enhance the stature of America on the "Iranian street." Neither Khatami nor any other regime-loyal cleric will be able to co-opt America's immense prestige and awe among the Iranian people by suggesting through some "dialogue of civilizations" that the clerical regime can command respect abroad, or that it can induce America to pay homage to the culture and permanence of Iran's Islamic revolution. This is painfully embarrassing for the regime, which in great part defines itself vis-à-vis the United States.

This was an easy but significant victory for President Bush and, more important, for the Iranian people, who unquestionably want "regime change" in Tehran. Quite contrary to the depiction one often sees on CNN or reads in the press, America's position in the Middle East has strengthened enormously since September 11. Where it matters most—and no place matters more than Iran (the



Ayatollah Khamenei smiles down on anti-U.S. demonstrators

AP/Wide World Photos / Mehdi Salemi

Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in comparison small potatoes)—America’s influence has increased, if not skyrocketed. The Israeli-Palestinian war has, by the way, also fortified America’s awe throughout the region. By returning to the West Bank, the Israelis, and by extension their American allies, have demonstrated how they, not Yasser Arafat and his minions, hold most of the cards in the Israeli-Palestinian future. President Bush’s decision to ignore Arafat and return Washington’s attention to the coming war with Iraq, combined with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s more aggressive military actions, has with alacrity diminished Arafat, and effectively undercut Egypt’s and Saudi Arabia’s designs to direct America’s foreign policy.

Despite his administration’s dithering on Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian question, President Bush through his war on terrorism, the axis-of-evil speeches, and his new doctrine of preemptive warfare has clearly reversed the momentum in the region, putting America’s foes on the defensive. It is worthwhile to look back just a few years to see the magnitude of the Bush administration’s achievement since September 11. Think about the Clinton administration’s record in the Middle East. In particular, look at the way that administration handled Iran. On the ground and in the mind, the difference is striking. The Bush administration may well waste what it has achieved, depending on its future actions in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, but the promise and possibilities of change in the region have never been greater.

The Clinton administration, like a majority of Iran-watchers in the academy and press, really did not enjoy dissecting the nature of the Islamic Republic’s tyranny. Children of the left, the Clintonites by and large could not free themselves of a basic tenet of *tiers-mondisme*: The injection of Western thought into the bloodstream of foreign cultures is somehow illicit. The same folks who had a hard time being staunch cold warriors *before* the Berlin Wall fell had a particularly hard time dealing with Islam as a political force. They wanted to avoid suggesting that there was anything politically obstreperous about Islam. Liberal, secularized Christians and Jews who wouldn’t hesitate to dissect the political nature of Christianity and Judaism avoided turning the same acumen towards the Middle East’s last great monotheism.

As the author Susan Sontag once remarked in a discussion about Islam and the West, it was good and right to be “pro-Muslim.” Behind the Clinton administration’s hope that Mohammad Khatami was something decisively different was more than a little Vietnam-era idealism and

guilt about the past exercise of American power in the region. Where the pro-engagement crowd on the American right wanted to reduce or drop sanctions against the Islamic Republic primarily because of a love of free trade and a growing annoyance at the intrusion of American morality into the realpolitik of foreign affairs, the pro-engagement crowd on the American left wanted to reduce or drop sanctions primarily because of an irenic temperament. Bill Clinton wanted to make friends. Just as the Clinton crowd thought Yasser Arafat wanted peace with the Israelis, they thought Mohammad Khatami and company really wanted an amicable dialogue.

Of course, this did not mean that liberals didn’t have troublesome ideals. Women’s rights were an unqualified good. Persecution of Baha’is and Jews in Iran was deplorable. Stoning was bad. Lopping off hands and feet was not good either. Trying to kill the British novelist Salman Rushdie was unconscionable. But these ethical infractions somehow couldn’t and shouldn’t impede the commendable attempt to find a “third way,” an “Islamic path to democracy.” The pro-woman cleric Mohammad Khatami and the “reformist” mullahs behind him might well, we were assured by many journalists, academics, and not a few sympathetic U.S. officials off the record, hatch some kind of “post-Islamist” democratic order—an Islamism with a human face.

We needed to be patient and sympathetic and, above all, non-confrontational. We should apologize for our sins to advance reconciliation, which according to the director of the new Persian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the NGOers of the Soros Foundation, ought to be the ultimate objective. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright accordingly apologized for the American-backed 1953 coup against the oil-nationalizing Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. She also apologized for our subsequent support to the shah and our “shortsighted” aid to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. President Clinton went further—further certainly than any president has ever gone in trying to elevate apologia into diplomacy. He apologized for everything. He apologized not only for us, but for the entire West. President Clinton expressed his highest ideals as a form of international therapy. In an amazing, off-the-cuff speech in April 1999, the president gave us his formula for Middle Eastern conflict resolution:

Iran has been . . . a subject of quite a lot of abuse from various Western nations. . . . It’s quite important to tell people: Look, you have a right to be angry at something my country or my culture or others that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago. . . . So I think while we speak out against religious intolerance we have to listen for possible ways we can give people the legitimacy of some of their fears, of some of their

angers, or some of their historical grievances, and then say . . . now can we build a common future?

In an Iranian context, the president's well-intended sentiments were risible. Haughty and heavy-handed, the Iranians are not known for showing empathy toward their neighbors. Shahs and mullahs do not apologize. For them, statecraft is not soulcraft. It is about power. For many of the clerics in Iran, it's also about projecting God's will on earth. By disposition, President Clinton and his administration were exquisitely ill-suited to handle Iran and the Middle East. The very empathy they aimed at clerical Iran only fed the belief in the region that the United States is no longer a power much to be feared.

It is impossible to imagine George W. Bush apologizing to Iran, or to any country with which the United States has played hardball politics. It genetically just couldn't happen. In that difference of personal chemistry—and for both Bush and Clinton it is certainly more a matter of sentiment than intellectualized strategy—lies the possibility for Bush of greatness in foreign affairs. But what should the Bush administration do next concerning the Islamic Republic?

The wisest path is probably to punt downfield, as the administration is doing with the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. The war with Iraq—assuming it happens—will have an enormous impact on the Middle East. If the United States stays in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime, and ushers in some type of a federal, democratic system, the repercussions throughout the region could be transformative. Popular discontent in Iran tends to heat up when U.S. soldiers get close to the Islamic Republic. An American invasion could possibly provoke riots in Iran—simultaneous uprisings in major cities that would simply be beyond the scope of regime-loyal specialized riot-control units. The army or the Revolutionary Guard Corps would have to be pulled into service in large numbers, and that's when things could get interesting. The clerical regime fears big street confrontations, afraid that it cannot rely on the loyalty of either the army or the Guard Corps.

And if an American invasion doesn't provoke urban unrest, the creation of a democratic Iraq probably will. Iraq's majority Shiite population, who will inevitably lead their country in a democratic state, will start to talk to their Shiite brethren over the Iran-Iraq border. The collective Iranian conversation about American-aided democracy in Iraq will be brutal for the mullahs (which is why the Bush administration should prepare itself for

Iranian mischief in Iraq's politics once Tehran determines that the Bush administration is indeed serious about ensuring a democratic triumph in Baghdad). The Bush administration should, of course, quickly and loudly support any demonstrators who hit the streets in Iran. America's approval will not be the kiss of death for the brave dissidents who challenge the regime's armed defenders. On the contrary, such psychological support could prove critical to those trying to show to the people that the die is now decisively cast against the regime.

Yet unless the ruling mullahs, or their terrorist stepchildren, the Lebanese Hezbollah, force Washington to respond to some egregious act of terrorism before the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration ought to just let the clerics stew in their own mess. Thinking seriously about Iraq and Iran simultaneously might overwhelm the administration, which seemed completely consumed for a time by the rather small-scale war in Afghanistan.

Eventually, the administration may have to deal forcefully with the Lebanese Hezbollah—who remain perhaps the most lethal terrorist organization in the Middle East—and their Iranian and Syrian backers. The administration may have to tell the Russians, sooner rather than later, that their support of Iran's nuclear program is unacceptable. (If the Russians ignore us—and we should try to devise the most painful arm-twisting that we can for Moscow—then the administration ought to prepare for a military strike against the Bushehr reactor facility. Under no circumstances should the United States allow Bushehr to become operational.)

But for the time being, we should focus on the bully pulpit. The administration and Congress should ensure by some means that the unfortunately bankrupt National Iranian Television satellite channel in Los Angeles keeps on broadcasting to Iran (the ruling clerics detest this independent Iranian-American enterprise). Iranian expatriates living in the United States and the West have done enormous good for their homeland by prospering in emigration and by informing their friends and family in Iran—virtually everybody, given the way gossip works in the country—of their lives in the West. Iranian expatriates are the most consequential players in America's public diplomacy with the Muslim world.

President Bush, of course, doesn't need National Iranian Television broadcasts to beam his message into the Islamic Republic. Everything he says moves at lightspeed through the country. The president just needs to keep talking about freedom being the birthright of Muslim peoples. If he does so, he will do vastly more for the Iranian people than Mohammad Khatami ever will. And if history repeats itself—as goes Iran, so will go the Muslim world. ♦