

Weekly Global Report

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Special Report

Time for Change in Iran? An Interview with Key Iranian Opposition Leader, Dr Assad Homayoun

Interview. By Jason Fuchs. *Dr Assad Homayoun is one of the most significant leaders of Iran's exiled nationalist opposition, as head of the Azadegan Foundation (<http://azadeganiran.com/>), an umbrella organisation which supports democratic change in Iran. Dr Homayoun, who appears regularly on Iranian radio and television — broadcast from abroad — as well as in the US media, is a former senior Iranian diplomat currently residing in the United States. He was in charge of political affairs at the Iranian Embassy in Washington DC for 12 years and, just before the 1979 revolution, was Minister and Chargé of the Embassy.*

For the past 20-plus years, Dr Homayoun has provided advice and counsel to many opposition groups in exile. He helped organise the Azadegan movement along with its founder, the late Gen. Dr Bahram Aryana, who mounted a campaign to topple the clerical Administration in Tehran, but died in exile. Dr Homayoun earned his PhD in International Relations at George Washington University in Washington DC, and served as a professor there, as well. He is the author of many articles on international, Middle Eastern and Iranian affairs. He is also a Senior Fellow at the International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA), the parent organisation of Defense & Foreign Affairs Publications.

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What are the Bush Administration's options for dealing with the Iranian Islamic Republic?

As far as I know, Washington is looking at several different options: diplomatic negotiations, sanctions, and war (in the form of an airborne attack, or covert operations aimed at destabilising the Iranian Government). None of these will be successful.

The most important weapon at the disposal of the United States and the civilized world is the people of Iran. The theocratic leaders in Iran are afraid of nothing but the Iranian people. In the US, generally speaking, you have two groups with respect to Iran. There are the hardliners, who reserve the military option, and include, most prominently, several Republican Senators, such as Sen. John McCain (Republican, Arizona), and, most recently, Sen. Joe Lieberman (Independent, Connecticut), and also the office of Vice-President Dick Cheney. And there are those in favour of diplomatic engagement, such as the current Secretary of State, Dr Condoleezza Rice, and the State Department at large. This group believes that if specific issues with the Iranian Government can be resolved then perhaps some *modus vivendi* could be reached between Washington and Tehran.

This second line of thought stems from the policy suggestions outlined by [former US Secretary of State] James Baker and [former Congressman] Lee Hamilton in their Iraq Study Group (ISG) report, which favoured engagement with Iran and Syria.

Why do you think negotiations between Washington and Tehran would fail to achieve substantive results?

I don't think negotiation with Iran will take the US, or the Iranian people, anywhere because it [the clerical Administration] is not a normal regime. It is an apocalyptic regime whose leadership is in favour of the advance of radical Islam around the world; what the clerics officially refer to as the "export of the Islamic revolution". And so there are no reformists; there are no radicals — not in the context in which the West understands those terms — in Iran: the "reformists" and the "radicals" are two wings of the same monster. This monster has terrorised the Middle East since the so-called Islamic revolution in 1979 that brought Khomeini to power.

The "grand bargain" with Tehran which the US State Department has in mind — a proposal which David Samuels wrote about in his June 2007 *Atlantic Monthly* article — will, I suspect, turn out to be the "grand illusion" because, ultimately, the differences between Washington and Tehran are not over policy nuances or even the projection of US strategic power in the Middle East. Make no mistake, Tehran has very serious foreign policy disagreements with the Middle East and is gravely concerned with the US presence in the region.

The issue, though, is far bigger from the Tehran's perspective: it is an existential issue; it is a matter of a civilizational conflict between, as they see it, the secular West and its regional allies, and "true Islam", of which they envision themselves to be the vanguard forces. On such an issue, Tehran will not be able to compromise and so, as I see it, the rift between the theocratic regime and the US is as wide as the Khyber Pass and cannot be crossed.

Would you say that the US and Iran then are looking at this conflict through very different prisms, then?

The US foreign policy establishment looks at this as an issue between two nation-states with differing agendas, and so they look for common ground upon which a foundation for better future relations can be built. Unfortunately, as far as the Iranian leadership is concerned, this is not a national issue, *per se*. They may use nationalism to rally the population, but it is worth remembering what the regime's founder, "Ayatollah" Ruhollah Khomeini, told a French journalist in February 1979. Khomeini was onboard the Air France flight which was returning him to Tehran from exile in Paris and the reporter asked the "Ayatollah" what he felt upon returning to his homeland after so many years away. Khomeini responded, "Nothing."

For him and for the regime he birthed, the issue is not Iran: Iran means nothing to these people, nation-states themselves are merely a means to an end to the Khomeinists. As they see it, Iran was and is a springboard for the so-called "export of the Islamic Revolution", but nothing more.

You mentioned three other options aside from diplomatic engagement and said they were all likely doomed to fail. What about sanctions? Why do you feel they are not an effective tool?

Sanctions have brought some economic change to Iran, but they will not be decisive because Tehran will be able to work around them, as did Iraq's Saddam Hussein during the 1990s. And, again, as in [the case of] Iraq, the victim will not be the Iranian regime, but rather the people. Moreover, I doubt that China and Russia will agree to truly comprehensive sanctions against Iran because, at the end of the day, they do not want to see change in Tehran. Whatever form sanctions might take, it is important to remember that the pace of Iranian nuclear weapons development will be — and is — much faster than the pace at which sanctions would take effect.

Why will a war, presumably in the form of an air campaign, not prove effective?

There are no good war options. Presumably, the attack would come from US airborne and seaborne forces, perhaps with US Special Forces coordinating on the ground. One can imagine that Washington would take aim at Iranian nuclear research installations in Natanz and Arak and Ishfahan and other places, against leadership targets, and certain select strategic military targets. The problems with this option are many.

First of all, it is unlikely to achieve its primary aim of stopping the Iranian nuclear weapons program. The Iranian nuclear weapons development program in 2007 is not like the Iraqi nuclear weapons development program in 1981. The Iraqi program was, as you know, clustered around one particular facility at Osirak, making it relatively easy for the Israelis to stop the Iraqi push for a nuclear weapon in a strike at a single target. The Iranian program is quite different. It is diversified, it is far flung, and it is redundant: designed specifically to prevent another Osirak.

Thus, even a massive air strike would not stand a good chance of stopping Iran's nuclear weapons program. The second problem is that some members of the Iranian leadership are actually *hoping* for a US military strike against Iran. There is the belief in some regime circles, particularly around Pres. Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad and his spiritual mentor, *Ayatollah*

Mesbah Yazdi, that the Iranian Islamic Republic's domestic political situation is very similar now to what it was in 1981. In 1981, it was already possible to see the cracks in Khomeini's new Iran. Iranians were beginning to see that this new Iran was not the one they had been promised, and so, only two years after the 1979 revolution, you saw political unrest and all the indicators that Iranians wanted change.

This political ferment, this burgeoning anti-regime sentiment, was quickly anesthetised when the Iran-Iraq war began that year. For while Iranians were fast learning to detest their new masters, they remained proud patriots, proud nationalists, and were not about to allow a foreign power to defeat it on the battlefield. And so, Iranians rallied around the flag, as they say in America, and 26 years later they are still stuck with this regime.

Pres. Ahmadi-Nejad and his followers are hoping that a limited US military strike which leaves them in power will have the same unifying effect and save them at a moment when Iranians are, as they were in 1981, beginning to unify not for the regime, but against it. It would be a mistake to force the people back into the hands of the *mullahs* just as they are again beginning to break free of their iron grip. In this respect, a military strike that leaves the regime in power will be playing into the hands of the very regime Washington would be going to war against.

What if the military operation was conceived on a more massive scale, aimed at removing the clerical Administration, not just the nuclear weapons program?

Well, assuming the US was willing to make the commitment in terms of blood and treasure to enforce "regime change" on Tehran, the situation might not look much better. A massive strike might have the effect of fracturing the nation, contributing to the disintegration of Iran, which might very well lead to the Balkanisation of the strategically vital region that is the Middle East.

Washington must also be aware that a military strike that endangers the perpetuity of the Iranian regime could result in serious military reprisals by Iran against Israel and the Gulf states allied with the US. Such a war could even lead to a tactical nuclear exchange. Big or small, the military option is simply not a viable one. It isn't in the American people's interests; nor is it in the interests of the Iranian people. It is as Sun-Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*: "The best victory is when the opponent surrenders of its own accord before there are any actual hostilities. It is best to win without fighting." This is the sort of victory we should look for with regards to Iran.

You also mentioned covert operations. What might result from such a strategy?

To a certain extent, this strategy is already being implemented. Not in earnest, but piecemeal.

There is already emerging a strategy of support for various so-called "anti-regime elements" by the US through the Saudis and the Pakistanis. The problem with this is the nature of these anti-regime forces. We have seen covert support through Pakistan for the Baluchi *jihadist* group *JundAllah*. We have seen similar support for Iranian Kurdish militants like Abdullah Mohtadi's *Komala*. We have seen US and also British backing for Arab militants in Iranian Khuzestan. And, yes, these are all virulently anti-regime elements and, yes, they are capable of putting this funding to use

in limited asymmetrical strikes against the regime's forces as we saw when *JundAllah* blew up a bus full of *Pasdaran* officers last year [2006], but the issue is the following: the only thing the Iranian people are more afraid of than their own government is that Iran will become the next Iraq; that Iran will disintegrate into ethnic or sectarian defined entities at war with one another.

The Iranian regime is overwhelmingly unpopular within Iran, but the notion of the proud Iranian nation being dissolved is universally unpopular. And so, when Washington or anyone else supports groups that define themselves by their ethnic or sectarian banners, the Iranian people fear that this will only lead to the dissolution of their homeland, not its long-overdue liberation. Thus, such steps are counterproductive. Iran is just like a Persian carpet with different colours, different designs, but all a part of the same carpet: just like Iran, one nation, indivisible.

Those who fan the ominous tunes of separatism/federalism are underestimating the resolve of the Iranian people.

You earlier noted that the most important weapon at the disposal of the US against the Iranian Government is the Iranian people. What do you mean by that?

The Iranian internal situation is dire, at levels of hardship and suffering unseen in recent memory. Young people are unemployed; there is 25 percent unemployment nationally, inflation is at 22 percent, drugs and prostitution and hunger continue to eat away at the nation from the inside out and all of this is because of the mismanagement and corruption of the regime. It is as much a kleptocracy as it is a theocracy.

A report leaked to ABC News recently revealed a "covert" CIA program to "increase economic pressure" on Iran. As far as I'm concerned, the Iranian Government does not need the help of the CIA to wreck the Iranian economy: the *mullahs* appear to be accomplishing this well enough by themselves. As the historian E. H. Carr wrote in *What Is History?*: "Politics begin where the masses are not thousands, but millions." Nowhere, then, could politics be more serious than now in Iran where the people opposed to this regime are, indeed, in the millions. There are close to 50-million young people, possibly more, under the age of 25.

The reality is that the regime is in worse shape than ever, and the people are ready to rise and need only be galvanized.

What needs to be done to galvanise the people and why have they yet to be sufficiently galvanised if, indeed, the domestic situation is as bad as it appears to be?

The Iranian people are ready but they need the financial means and the political leadership. Just like gasoline for a car, without money you cannot move an organisation. However, I do not believe that money from the US Government will be very useful. The Iranian people, since 1953, are very sensitive to the involvement of US funding in Iranian politics and so I have always been against receiving money from Washington and, indeed, I have not and never will.

The Iranian expatriate community controls [US]\$600-billion to [US]\$800-billion outside of Iran, however, and we need the expatriate community to be energised and active in building a better, stronger, free and democratic

Iran, and to this end some of this wealth could be put to excellent use. In fairness to them, until now, their support for the Iranian opposition movement has been limited because there has not been an Iranian opposition organisation with the contacts and grassroots support inside Iran, with the complimentary and necessary support structure outside Iran. And, perhaps most important, an opposition leadership untainted by ties to either the ruling *mullahs* or Western governments has not been visible to them.

Where does Azadegan come into this equation?

The Azadegan Foundation is an organisation dedicated to change in Iran; change from the tyranny of theocracy to the liberty of secular democracy. The organisation has supporters within many different social strata in the Iranian political and cultural scene, including members in the student movement, intellectuals, the noble and proud Iranian Armed Forces and even within the *Pasdaran*, which is home to a degree of anti-regime sentiment which might surprise many observers of the Iranian political scene.

The [Azadegan] goal is removing the clergy from power and preparing the ground for free and fair democratic elections to let the people of Iran decide their own future. Azadegan envisions a strong Iran dedicated to peace and stability in the region. We envision an Iran at peace with its neighbours, including Israel with whom we have no interest in being enemies. Why is Iran an enemy of the Jewish state?

We share no borders with Israel. We have no conflict over natural resources with Israel. So, then, why is the regime preoccupied with Israel's destruction while they allow their own nation to self-destruct? How can the regime justify paying the killers of HAMAS and *HizbAllah* and the *Jaish al-Mahdi* in Iraq and even now — as US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns noted last week [early June 2007] — the Afghan *Taliban* all the while Iranian children go hungry, while Iranians can't find jobs to support their families? Instead of paying for schools to be blown up in lands far from home, should not a truly patriotic Iranian government instead pay for schools to be built up here in our own home?

So Israel would not be an enemy of a free Iran in Azadegan's vision?

Absolutely not. History, geography, and culture have always brought the Jewish and Iranian communities together since the time of Cyrus the Great when he ended the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people and allowed them to return to their homeland, modern-day Israel. Israel knows no greater friend, no truer ally, than the people of Iran.

There is a reluctance in Washington today to deal with exiles and opposition leaders such of yourself because of what many call the "Chalabi Syndrome". That is, that after the Bush Administration's experience with the Iraqi National Congress (INC) leader, Ahmad Chalabi, the US Government will forever more be reluctant to work with dissident leaders. How do you convince policymakers that you are not the Iranian Chalabi?

Ahmad Chalabi received money from the US Government, for one thing. I have never asked for US Government money and I have never received US Government money. I will never ask for US government money nor will I

ever accept US Government money. Am I friend of the United States? One hundred percent. And rest assured the US government is well aware of my activities. However, it is important that I remain untainted. Chalabi could not make a similar claim as he received money through the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and/or DoD [Department of Defense] throughout the 1990s, particularly after the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act passed by the US Congress. And, of course, Chalabi deceived the US at the same time he was receiving money from them.

As importantly, I think that people need to understand that just because Washington had a negative experience with Chalabi does not mean that all opposition leaders from here to eternity are all bad men with ulterior motives antithetical to their publicly stated beliefs and objectives. Does this mean that from now on, any leader in exile from their homeland who dares stand against oppression and tyranny will be tarred as the "next Chalabi"?

Perhaps we should now retroactively apply the same label to earlier dissidents, like Poland's Lech Walesa or the Czech Republic's Vaclav Havel. In light of the Chalabi situation, do we now need to reappraise them, as well? Of course not. Men like Walesa and Havel were men of bravery and courage and vision the likes of which our region is in desperate need of today.

Should Washington be discerning in whom it chooses to work with? Absolutely. The American people, like any people, deserve to have their tax dollars spent in a way that reflects the national interest. At the same time, it is important not to allow the Chalabi debacle to prevent an unequivocal American stance in favour of Islamic liberals and Islamic democrats who are America's truest allies in its war against Islamist-jihadism.

What is it, then, that you need from the US Government?

From Washington, we ask for clear-cut, unequivocal and vocal support. Washington must not underestimate the power of words. Words matter. When the [US] State Department meets with their counterparts of the Iranian Foreign Ministry and speaks with them about Iraq, the message to Iranians is that lofty rhetoric about freedom for Iran is just that—rhetoric. The message is that Washington wishes Iranians the best, but that ultimately if Tehran is forthcoming with a deal they find worthwhile, then the United States will leave the Iranian people to their captors.

The Iranian people must know that the US Government and the American people stand with them in their quest for freedom. When the President of the United States, the leader of the Free World, speaks to the Iranian people, on the other hand, and demands they be treated with respect and dignity, when he demands that they be granted the freedom that only God can give and that these false "men of God" have stolen, Iranians know that when they stand for their freedom, they will not stand alone.

We know the names of so many Iranians who now languish in Iranian jails only for saying what they believed, but rest assured there are others who languish unknown. And it is to that unknown prisoner, that unknown Iranian man or woman or child, who sits alone at night in his pitch-black cell in Evin Prison, that the US and the Free World must shout loud and clear that even in the dark you are not alone and you are not forgotten and you never will be.