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What Is Next in Iran?

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The opposition movement that spontaneously rose up against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has lost momentum in the aftermath of the regime's crackdown on popular protests over the disputed results of the presidential election. Faced with intensifying violence from the regime's security forces, the opposition has been forced to abandon mass rallies and is preparing for a protracted campaign of civil disobedience.

The Obama Administration should make it clear that it stands with Iran's democratic opposition and lead an international coalition to pressure Tehran to unclench its fist from around the throats of its own people.

Uneasy Standoff. The massive protests that convulsed Iran in the days after the June 12 presidential election have petered out in the face of unrelenting repression. More than 600 people have been arrested, including dozens of journalists. Although the official death total stands at 17 protesters since the demonstrations began, CNN has reported that it received unconfirmed reports that as many as 150 protesters were killed on June 20 alone.

Iran's ruling regime has flooded the streets of Tehran with uniformed police, riot police, secret police, and the paramilitary thugs of the *Basij* militia. These forces have used guns, tear gas, and clubs to brutalize and intimidate Iran's opposition forces. But dwindling crowds of protesters do not signal the end of the opposition but merely a new stage in the struggle.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, Ahmadinejad's chief challenger in the election and now the de facto leader of

the opposition, has shown great resolve and is unlikely to give in. Although his followers have been deterred by the threat of violence from participating in daylight rallies, they continue to gather on their rooftops in Tehran each night to chants of "*Allahu Akbar*" ("God is great") as a sign of protest. Sporadic unrest is likely to continue in cities and universities for the indefinite future. Periodic outbursts of protest will probably erupt at the mourning ceremonies that occur on the third, seventh, and 40th day after the deaths of protesters, according to Shiite tradition.

Iran's ruling regime has shown itself to be out of touch with and cruelly indifferent to the popular opinion of its own people. By resorting to brute force, the regime has lost whatever legitimacy it had in the eyes of many Iranians. But as long as the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, retains the undivided loyalty of the security forces, particularly the Revolutionary Guards, the regime will not be toppled by protest rallies.

A Change in Tactics? The loosely organized opposition movement currently is debating a change of tactics, such as moving from mass rallies to smaller symbolic protests or considering civil disobedience actions such as labor strikes or boycotts. Ultimately, the opposition's prospects for success

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may depend on mobilizing support in key economic sectors, such as the *bazaaris* (merchants), labor unions, and the oil industry. Oil workers played a crucial role in bringing down the Shah in the 1979 Islamic revolution and could provide considerable leverage over the current regime, which is dependent on Iran's oil earnings for over 80 percent of export revenues.

There also are cracks at the top of the regime, as well as in its foundation, that the opposition could exploit. Powerful members of the old guard revolutionary leadership, such as former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, have sided with the opposition against Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani may be able to use his insider connections and his leadership of two important institutions—the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council—to undermine Ahmadinejad's position within the regime. Montazeri, who was once Ayatollah Khomeini's heir apparent before falling out of favor and being placed under house arrest, could further erode the already fractured religious legitimacy of the regime.

What began as a spontaneous test of willpower on Iran's streets has now evolved into a protracted test of staying power. The outcome of the power struggle will ultimately depend on factional politics within the regime, the loyalty of the internal security forces, the fortitude of opposition leaders in the face of extreme pressure, and their ability to inspire key groups to join a broad coalition of Iranians in risking their lives to bring major changes to Iran.

Lessons Learned.

- *The spontaneous outpouring of protest reflects a deep popular dissatisfaction with the regime.* What was surprising was not that the election was fraudulent but that Iranian people reacted so strongly to the regime's deceit. Popular support for Mousavi, who lacks personal charisma, mushroomed because of a backlash against Ahmadinejad, not specific support for Mousavi's program of limited reform.
- **The only vote that counts in Iran's authoritarian system is the Supreme Leader's.** The June 12 vote was not a true election but a selection of candidates that had been pre-screened by officials loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei. Khamenei may have overplayed his hand by moving quickly to endorse the questionable election results despite the protests. But according to Iran's revolutionary constitution, the will of the Supreme Leader trumps the will of the people on all important questions.
- *Genuine reform is blocked within Iran's Islamist political system.* Ayatollah Khamenei, who lacks scholarly credentials and never felt at home with high-ranking clerics who resented his political power, has become increasingly dependent on the Revolutionary Guards, where he found his protégé, Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad has placed an estimated 10,000 loyalists, including many cronies from the Revolutionary Guards, in critical positions throughout the state bureaucracies and revolutionary organs of the regime. This amounts to a slow-motion coup by the Revolutionary Guards. By stonewalling reform efforts, Iran's hard-liners have created a situation in which popular pressure for tearing down the Islamist system will inevitably mount.
- *The regime cannot be trusted.* A regime that deceives, represses, and kills its own people cannot be trusted by the United States to fulfill any agreement that it makes with outsiders.

Next Steps. President Barack Obama's gradually evolving message on Iran belatedly included criticism of the regime's repression and human rights abuses. His Administration, however, continues to cling to wishful thinking about the possibility of negotiating a sustainable rapprochement with Iran's ruling regime.

Unfortunately, this effort is doomed to fail because hostility to the United States, which the regime considers to be the "Great Satan," is an ideological cornerstone of the Islamic Republic. The chances of negotiating an acceptable resolution of the standoff over Iran's nuclear program, which were minimal to begin with, have now been considerably reduced.

In the long run, a free Iran is the best hope for peace and security in the volatile Middle East. The Obama Administration should therefore not turn its back on the Iranian opposition in a vain effort to

strike a deal with the regime. This would undermine not only American national interests but also American ideals. In the words of one Iranian dissident: “Obama claims to be like President Lincoln. Then he should uphold the principles of Lincoln.”¹

The Administration should seek to rally international support for increased sanctions on Iran’s renegade regime. European allies, in particular, could do a lot more to pressure Tehran to halt its repression of its own citizens and freeze its nuclear program. The Obama Administration should press its European and other allies to impose the same level of economic and travel sanctions that the United States has imposed on Iran.

If these sanctions do not dissuade Tehran from continuing on its present path, then Washington must prepare for a nuclear Iran. It should invest in

missile defenses against Iran’s growing ballistic missile force and deploy missile defenses to help protect its allies from that threat. The United States should mobilize an international coalition to contain and deter Iran while imposing rising economic, political, diplomatic, and possibly military costs on the regime for flouting its responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.²

The Bottom Line. The bottom line is that Obama Administration officials must abandon wishful thinking and deal with Iran as it is, not as how they would like it to be.

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For more information on Iran, see **Iran Briefing Room:**
<http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/IranBriefingRoom.cfm>.

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1. Kenneth Timmerman, “Key Iranian Dissident Riled at Obama’s Approach,” NewsMax.com, June 23, 2009, at http://www.newsmax.com/timmerman/Obama_Iran_dissident/2009/06/23/228283.html (June 26, 2009).
 2. For more on U.S. policy on Iran see “Iran’s Nuclear Threat: The Day After,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 53, June 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/sr0053.cfm>.