



Is American Support for Middle Eastern Dissidents the Kiss of Death?

By Michael Rubin

Speaking at the National Endowment for Democracy on February 4, 2004, President George W. Bush declared, "True democratic reform must come from within. . . . When the leaders of reform ask for our help, America will give it."¹ Less than a year later, at his second inauguration, he reiterated his freedom agenda: "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."² While many dissidents welcomed his words, the administration became bogged down on how to implement them. At the heart of the foreign policy debate was the question of whether U.S. embrace of and support for dissidents helps or hurts them. Does moral or financial support advance reform or impede it?

The struggle for freedom is a defining principle of the United States. The Declaration of Independence defines "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as unalienable rights. In the nineteenth century, the United States supported South American liberation movements and, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, established electoral systems in Cuba and the Philippines.³ At the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson declared the common theme of his Fourteen Points to be "the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another."⁴

World War II shattered the notion that an age of liberty was at hand. As the Cold War dawned, Washington cast aside its emphasis on democracy and liberty. Cold War polarity, inaugurated at Yalta, permeated the Middle East. Successive administrations eschewed reform and democracy, instead basing policy on realist strategic calculations of which countries fell in which superpower's sphere of influence.⁵ As Graham Fuller, a former vice chair of the National Intelligence Council,

Michael Rubin (mrubin@aei.org) is a resident scholar at AEI.

explained, "The ideology of anticommunism as a guiding principle of foreign policy came to overshadow an emphasis on democracy and freedom."⁶

Many in the foreign policy establishment opposed the freedom and democracy agenda,⁷ but Congressional activism helped overcome their resistance. Henry Kissinger opposed the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked trade with the Soviet Union to that country's treatment of Jewish emigration, for fear that it could disrupt other diplomatic initiatives.⁸ Under Kissinger, the State Department refused Helsinki Commission staff access to classified cables and balked at commissioners' travel to Eastern Europe.⁹

Democracy and liberty did not again become a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy until Ronald Reagan's administration.¹⁰ "Our mission today," Reagan told the British parliament on June 8, 1982, "is to preserve freedom as well as peace." He called for active support for those struggling for liberty, declaring, "Democracy is not a fragile flower; still, it needs cultivating," and urged activism: "While we must be cautious about forcing the pace of change, we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take

concrete actions to move toward them.”¹¹ The following year, Congress established the National Endowment for Democracy.¹² Supporting freedom, whether through nonviolence or with arms, was a consistent theme during the remainder of Reagan’s presidency.

While State Department officials worried that Reagan’s characterization of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” could impede détente,¹³ the collapse of the Communist superpower validated Reagan’s emphasis on human rights and liberty. Although realists had questioned the wisdom of supporting dissidents, the liberated dissidents affirmed the importance of Western public support and moral clarity. Natan Sharansky, imprisoned in the Soviet gulag from 1977 to 1986, wrote that knowing that there was international concern for human rights led him and other Soviet dissidents to redouble their protests.¹⁴ The “evil empire” speech, while roundly condemned by diplomats in Washington and other Western capitals, emboldened democrats. “We dissidents were ecstatic. Finally, the leader of the free world had spoken the truth,” Sharansky recalled.¹⁵ Ilya Zaslavsky, a democratic bloc leader in the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies, credited Reagan rather than Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev with originating the perestroika reforms.¹⁶

Cold War No Longer

After the Cold War, the Middle East’s autocratic republics and powerful monarchies remained impervious to the spread of democracy that took root in Latin America, Africa, and east Asia. Democracy in the Middle East was not a priority for Washington. Gary C. Gambill, editor of the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, noted that Egypt and Jordan, the largest recipients of American foreign aid among Arab countries, did not hold internationally monitored elections in the 1990s.¹⁷ While their leaders cited the threat of Islamist radicals as reason to eschew reform, their security services targeted peaceful, liberal dissent.¹⁸

Throughout the 1990s, the United States and Europe voiced a desire to promote reform in the Middle East. In 1995, delegates of fifteen European Union members and seven Arab states met in Barcelona to discuss not only preservation of security and stability in the Mediterranean basin, but also promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights.¹⁹ But Brussels then backpedaled on its commitment to promote Middle Eastern democracy.²⁰

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks sparked debate in Washington about the importance of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy. Lorne Craner, assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor between 2001 and 2004, outlined the poles of

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the argument when he said: “[Some hoped] the shock of 9/11 . . . would diminish the diplomatically inconvenient issues of human rights and democracy. Others, many of whom had served in the Reagan administration, drew parallels between the 1980s and a post-9/11 world. In the 1980s, they believed, the U.S. success was in part due not only to stating what America stood against—Communism—but also in enunciating a counter-vision of democracy and freedom.”²¹ More than five years on, the debate rages, and consensus eludes policymakers. Recent experiences with dissent and reform in Iran and Egypt, though, suggest that overt support for dissent does not taint genuine reformers, but rather that it advances crucial U.S. interests.

Iran: Confusing Reform with Dissent

Nowhere has the question of how to promote democracy been more controversial than in Iran, where President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s administration continues to stonewall International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors as it returns to the Islamic Republic’s radical revolutionary roots.

Facing stalemate on the diplomatic front, in 2005 Congress allocated \$3 million for democratization in Iran.²² Although paltry, the funding set a precedent. R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs, explained that the Bush administration was taking a page from Ukraine and Georgia’s playbooks, where pro-democracy groups—in part funded by Western sources—led “people-power” revolutions unseating old-guard dictatorships.²³

On February 15, 2006, the Bush administration proposed increasing its spending to promote political change inside Iran to \$85 million.²⁴ The allocation was less than met the eye. By November 2006, the State Department had directed less than \$10 million to democracy programs.²⁵ Part of the reason for the failure to use the money fully and effectively was that senior diplomats believed that financial support might do more harm than good. According to a senior State Department official who briefed the press on background as the

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original request for funding went through, “We don’t have blinders on. We don’t want to hurt the people we are trying to help.”²⁶

The diplomats’ reluctance was backed by many area experts and academics. Abbas Milani, director of the Iranian studies program at Stanford University, said, “Anyone who wants American money in Iran is going to be tainted in the eyes of the Iranians.”²⁷ Amitai Etzioni, a professor of international affairs at George Washington University, argued that “American support for regime change only damages [the reformists’] cause and makes the mullahs dig their heels in deeper.”²⁸

There are two sorts of prominent Iranian dissidents who opposed American aid. The first kind, those who seek reform but not systematic change and are often labeled “reformists” by the Western media, is the Iranian equivalent of Communists under Gorbachev who sought to reform the implementation of Communism but did not object to its ideology. The other group of dissidents opposes U.S. assistance based on a misreading of U.S. policy goals.

Among those in the first group is Hossein Derakhshan, a prominent blogger who argued in the *New York Times* that Bush’s advocacy for democracy “effectively took one of the world’s most closely watched nuclear programs out of the hands of a reformer and placed it into the hands of a hard-line reactionary.”²⁹ With the stroke of a pen, he sought to foist blame for the Iranian electorate’s reaction to eight years of Khatami’s broken promises onto Washington. While the *New York Times* amplified his view, it was not long before Derakhshan showed his true colors and discredited himself as an

authentic reformer. In a September 2006 posting, Derakhshan endorsed coerced confessions, prompting among both reformist peers and dissidents “a mixture of bewilderment and outrage.”³⁰

The most prominent figure in the second camp is former Revolutionary Guard member-turned-investigative journalist Akbar Ganji. In January 2001, an Iranian court sentenced Ganji to ten years of imprisonment for attending a conference in Berlin at which he allegedly damaged state security. His real “crime,” however, was his blaming Iran’s intelligence service for the murder of prominent dissidents.³¹ In May 2005, he launched a hunger strike, declaring: “No one should be imprisoned—not even for a second—for expressing an opinion.” As his health faltered, the White House issued a statement of solidarity, saying, “The President calls on all supporters of human rights and freedom, and the United Nations, to take up Ganji’s case and the overall human rights situation in Iran.”³² He ended his hunger strike on August 17, was released from prison five months later, and four months after that began a speaking tour in the United States.

As he traveled through the United States, Ganji was vocal in his opposition to funding other dissidents. “What we need in our fight for freedom is not foreign aid but the conditions that would allow us to focus all of our energies on the domestic struggle and to rest assured that no one is encouraging the regime’s oppression,” he explained.³³ Such sentiments, though, reflect poor U.S. public diplomacy more than the taint of outside assistance. Ganji spoke of how both the Iranian media and opposition circles discussed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s request for assistance to support Iran’s democratic opposition. He commented that the allocation became “particularly controversial after an article in *The New Yorker* on March 6, 2006, suggested that this money might be used in an attempt to change the regime in Tehran with the help of Iranian democrats, particularly those living abroad.”³⁴

The article which caused such waves, though, was neither authoritative nor accurate. While seasoned Iran-watchers treat with skepticism the exaggerations of exile groups, the article’s author, Connie Bruck, treated them uncritically. She also allowed herself to become an agent by which former administration officials like Richard Armitage and Richard Haass could criticize and mischaracterize the democracy-promotion agenda. Armitage, for example, falsely suggested that both the Pentagon and the Office of the Vice President sought to support the Mujahideen-e Khalq, a terrorist group hated by

ordinary Iranians.³⁵ The Iranian audience reads such words as official script, not the product of unique personalities. Had former Bush administration officials not sought to use Iran as a game board upon which to play out venal Beltway battles, and had the White House or State Department moved quickly to correct the matter, such inaccuracies might not become accepted wisdom among Iran's democracy activists.

Ganji confirmed his antipathy for U.S. aid by boycotting a meeting with President Bush, preferring instead to meet with radical intellectual Noam Chomsky.³⁶ Here, too, his decision is less reflective of the attitude of dissidents in Iran and more reflective of the views of his handler. Organizing his tour was Goudarz Eghtedari, an Oregon-based peace activist who hosts a "progressive" radio show in Portland that has featured Chomsky, a number of outspoken opponents of the Bush administration, and supporters of engagement with the Islamic Republic.³⁷ Some academics Ganji visited spoke privately about his handler's overt politicization.

Ganji's experience also undercuts the notion that U.S. aid is responsible for Tehran's crackdown on dissent. While the Iranian government has used U.S. support for the democracy movement in Iran as an excuse to detain dissidents—most notably former National Endowment for Democracy fellow Ramin Jahanbegloo³⁸—the Islamic Republic has a long history of targeting dissidents. It was Ganji's exposure of the internal mechanism of this repression that led to his imprisonment.

Omid Memarian, an Iranian journalist and a visiting scholar at the University of California, enunciated concerns similar to Ganji's when he suggested that the taint of U.S. support facilitates the hard-liners' crackdown. "Now that the U.S. government is openly taking about providing money to Iranian dissidents and opposition groups," he explained. "These officials can openly and blatantly make accusations against any critical voice of being supported and financed by the U.S. government, thus making it even easier for the government to suppress them with little resistance or concern."³⁹ And, while the Iranian government did crack down on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), context suggests that blaming Washington is out of place. Hamid Reza Taraqi, the head of the hard-line Islamic Coalition Party, foreshadowed the crackdown well before the announcement of U.S. aid when he told the Iranian daily *Etemad*, "[It is] impossible to deal with the people's demands by setting up NGOs."⁴⁰ When Ahmadinejad proceeded to slash NGO budgets upon assuming office, he reallocated

the money to mosques and seminaries, the cornerstones of his constituency. Such shifts are consistent with changes of administration inside the Islamic Republic.⁴¹

Egypt: Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

Can direct U.S. assistance to dissidents and reformers work? In Egypt, it has. In 1988, Egyptian-American sociologist and democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim founded the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies. The center, which trains civil-society activists, publishes reports, and monitors elections, has made no secret of its acceptance of grants from U.S. and European foundations, including the National Endowment

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for Democracy.⁴² Egyptian government harassment grew in proportion to the center's activity. On June 30, 2000, Egyptian security detained twenty-eight employees and associates, and suspended the center's operations for three years.

The Egyptian government singled Ibrahim out for more severe punishment. On July 29, 2002, a Cairo court convicted him of embezzlement, receiving foreign funds without government authorization, and tarnishing Egypt's image.⁴³ But rather than acquiesce (and in contrast to the policies of previous administration), the Bush administration pushed back: on August 14, 2002, the White House suspended a \$130 million aid package to Egypt, making its resumption conditional on Ibrahim's release and improvement in the Egyptian government's attitude toward human rights.⁴⁴ The Egyptian foreign minister was defiant, declaring, "Egypt does not accept pressure and will not bow to pressure and everyone knows that,"⁴⁵ but within six months Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak acceded to the U.S. demand.⁴⁶ The White House won Ibrahim's release, and Mubarak—under sustained pressure—held an unprecedented contested presidential election.

Washington's success appears more striking next to Mubarak's backsliding and his crackdown on dissent that

accompanied the Bush administration's 2006 decision to deemphasize democracy as a U.S. foreign policy goal in the region. As U.S. pressure subsided, Mubarak cancelled municipal elections, arrested political opposition, and cracked down on judicial independence. Less than sixteen months after Condoleezza Rice spoke at the American University in Cairo and declared that "[t]he fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty,"⁴⁷ she stood beside Mubarak's foreign minister and neglected to mention democracy in her statement.⁴⁸ One day after Egyptian police broke up a peaceful, pro-democracy demonstration, Vice President Dick Cheney received Mubarak's son (and anointed successor).⁴⁹

The juxtaposition of Washington's early success with its subsequent failure illustrates the wisdom of dissident

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support. The supposed "taint" of Western support did not dissuade Ibrahim from accepting foreign funding. Syrian blogger and democracy activist Ammar Abdulhamid explains, "The reality is that Arab liberals are currently fighting to retain the last foothold that liberal values still have in the Arab world. In this they have no choice but to cooperate with external forces, at the risk of being denounced as traitors or pawns of the West. . . . [They] have no choice but to seek external sources of funding and expertise to support their various activities."⁵⁰ It is also telling that—as in Iran—the most vocal opponents of funding dissidents in Egypt are those who support preservation of the current regime.⁵¹ Hence, Hani Shukrallah, editor of *Al-Ahram Weekly*, argues the United States "should just stay away," calling U.S. aid "the kiss of death."⁵²

Mechanisms of Supporting Dissent

While support for dissent may complicate diplomacy, it remains crucial for reform. Realists may argue, as Henry Kissinger once did in a Soviet context, for gradualism in Washington's approach to Middle East reform, but the dominance of hereditary republics—in which presidents secure the succession of their sons—immunizes the region from such an approach. If an autocrat's goal is his son's succession,⁵³ then he will be disinclined to engage in any reform which might endanger the succession. Despite

European engagement, there has been no improvement in the Iranian government's respect for human rights.⁵⁴

Nor is silence effective. Because the White House, prior to the current administration, did not publicly demand the release of Arab political prisoners, Arab regimes did not need to release imprisoned dissidents in order to ingratiate themselves to Washington.⁵⁵

While silence is counterproductive, failure to sustain support is worse. Take the case of Libyan democracy activist Fathi El-Jahmi. Speaking in the East Room of the White House on March 12, 2004, Bush noted the release earlier that day of the Libyan dissident imprisoned in 2002 for advocating free speech and democracy: "It's an encouraging step toward reform in Libya."⁵⁶ Two weeks later, Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi rearrested El-Jahmi and the White House has been silent since.⁵⁷ The emboldened Libyan regime backtracked on reform and El-Jahmi remains imprisoned.⁵⁸ White House failure to back up its rhetoric causes the United States to hemorrhage credibility.

How should Washington support dissent? At the very least, the president and senior administration officials should use their bully pulpits to bestow moral support on dissidents. In the 1980s, Reagan's support for the Gdansk shipyard workers catalyzed a process that reverberated throughout the Eastern bloc. Twenty-five years later, the Bush administration has responded to action by the Islamic Republic's first independent union with silence.⁵⁹ In such cases, concern about a backlash against dissidents does not apply. They have already chosen to risk repression. In the case of the Iranian bus drivers' union, union executive Mansour Ossanlou had already gone to prison for his belief in freedom.

Dissidents represent not only themselves; they personalize broader movements. Although in 1981 the world focused on Lech Walesa, the leader of Poland's Solidarity movement, he represented tens of thousands of others. Dictators understand the importance of symbols and so should Washington. Ganji's importance to Iranians and his supporters abroad is rooted not in his individual case, but rather in his role as a symbol of the scores of other political prisoners who remain incarcerated in Iran. Mubarak has jailed losing presidential candidate Ayman Nour, and Libyan leader Qadhafi has imprisoned El-Jahmi—not for their alleged crimes, but for the cause they represent. Rather than "taint" such dissidents, international attention places accountability for their health and safety upon regimes that normally feel immune from such scrutiny. As in Eastern Europe, it is the political prisoners and dissidents who provide the best hope for peaceful

change. Diplomatic pressure is beneficial for America, now and for the future.

But how should the U.S. aid dissidents? Covert aid often backfires. Once exposed, the taint becomes overwhelming.⁶⁰ Overt foundation support is an option, but the involvement of embassies—as is the case both with Middle East Partnership Initiative and Foundation for the Future funds—often leads to conflicts of interest, as the diplomats' desire for stability trumps their willingness to support effective reform.

Washington should not, however, expect its money to create democracy. Dissidents are self-created. They establish their credentials at the grassroots. Those who fund their activity solely from external sources—as many expatriate Iranian groups seek to do—have little legitimacy or effectiveness. But once grassroots networks are established, there is no reason why their work should not be amplified by infusions of outside support, especially when repressive governments throughout the Middle East seek to monopolize resources.

What should Washington's role be? Support for dissent and reform is an investment. Some investments succeed; some fail. Rather than condescend to decide what is good or bad for reformers in the Middle East, U.S. policymakers should establish metrics to measure the success of their investment. In the case of the Ibn Khaldun Center, the wisdom of the National Endowment for Democracy's support is clear. The value of labor organizations in Iran, bloggers in Tunisia, and anti-militia activists in Lebanon should be equally clear. Taint is often a far greater impediment in the mind of Washington policymakers than it is among authentic dissidents, reformers, and liberal activists in the streets of the Middle East.

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