

[Do neoconservatives really care about the Iranian opposition?](#)

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The rumblings of the largely underground Iranian Green Movement encourage neoconservative pundit [Reuel Marc Gerecht](#). "I think it's the most amazing intellectual second revolution...that we've seen in the Middle East," he [told a packed briefing room](#) at Bloomberg's D.C. headquarters last month. But even as he called on President Barack Obama to do more to vocally support the embattled rights movement -- thinly veiled U.S. encouragement for regime change, in other words -- Gerecht pushed for bombing Iran.

Yet Green activists who work on the ground in Iran roundly oppose a military attack precisely because it will undermine opposition efforts. Confronted with their warnings against strikes by his debate opponent, Gerecht was dismissive. He derided dissident journalist Akbar Ganji as "delusional" and spoke in dangerous innuendo about Shirin Ebadi, a human rights lawyer and Nobel laureate. "There is a huge difference between what some dissidents will say privately and what they'll say publicly," said Gerecht of Ebadi, "and I'll leave it at that."

In a phone interview, Ebadi couldn't remember Gerecht by name (noting that she speaks to four or five journalists a day), but emphatically denied the charge that she talks out of both sides of her mouth. "Me, no! Everything I say, is exactly what I say," she told me in

Farsi. "Whoever said this, that I say different things in public and private, is wrong." "I'm the same person in public and private," she went on. "And I'm against war."

Ebadi hasn't been in Iran since the crackdown on demonstrators in the wake of the June 2009 elections, but she's nonetheless a tireless advocate for reform and human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. "The military option will not benefit the U.S. interest or the Iranian interest," she said recently in an interview with Think Progress, a Center for American Progress blog. "It is the worst option. You should not think about it. The Iranian people -- including myself -- will resist any military action."

Yet no neoconservative in punditry -- the field to which the movement has been mostly relegated by electoral defeat -- has been more strident in calling for an attack on Iran than Gerecht. A former C.I.A. agent and current fellow at the neoconservative [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#), Gerecht makes no secret of his ambitions. In the penthouse of the Bloombeg building, Gerecht boasted that he'd "counted up the other day: I've written about 25,000 words about bombing Iran. Even my mom thinks I've gone too far." Gerecht's disappointment that the administration of Barack Obama remains unlikely to strike was palpable, and he stated his unequivocal support for an Israeli attack, lamenting that if they didn't act soon, the opportunity might be lost.

"I believe Obama's Middle East policy is correct," [Ebadi told Matt Duss](#) of Think Progress, noting that by offering engagement Obama reveals the Iranians as the intransigent party in talks. Ganji, the dissident journalist, has also chimed in on Obama's policy. "[T]he mere fact that Obama didn't make military threats made the Green Movement possible," [Ganji said at the National Press Club](#) in Washington this summer. The following day, in his [acceptance speech](#) for the 2010 Cato Institute's Milton Friedman Award, Ganji also said military attacks were counter-productive for reforming Iran: "The Iranian regime will abuse the current emergency conditions -- brought on by the threat of a military strike -- to push the democratic Green Movement away from the center of world attention."

Ganji, who spent six years in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison before leaving Iran in 2006, told me by phone that a military attack would hurt the middle class at the center of the Green Movement. For this reason, both Ebadi and Ganji have also opposed the escalation of broad economic sanctions advocated by Gerecht. ([Ebadi supports](#) political sanctions against officials responsible for rights abuses.)

"I have a great deal of respect for Akbar Ganji, but he's delusional," Gerecht said at the Bloomberg forum after Center for American Progress's Brian Katulis mentioned Ganji as an opponent of belligerent U.S. rhetoric. "Ganji and the entire movement of the 'liberal reformers' -- and I use that in quotes -- were probably the most errant of the analysts on Iran in the 1990s." "They really did think there was going to be a soft revolution," he went on. "They really did think they could internally push the ball and that Khamenei would not crush them." (The current incarnation of the "liberal reform" movement -- the Green Movement that Gerecht so admires -- was also crushed in the wake of the disputed presidential election.)

I described Gerecht's comments and positions to Ganji, using the word 'neocoon,' for lack of a better translation. Ganji recognized the word. "Those who try to see the world this way created the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "The work of these neocons" -- Ganji used the word, too, amid his Farsi -- "who are 'not delusional' have helped increase Islamic fundamentalism."

Many other Iranian opposition figures and reform-aligned activists have publicly spoken out against broad-based sanctions, including movement leaders [Mir Hossein Mousavi](#) (and, more recently, [one of his top advisers](#)) and [Mehdi Karroubi](#). "Human rights activists have been fighting for human rights for years and they consistently have gone on record opposing war and sanctions," Sussan Tahmasebi, a women's rights activist who's worked in Iran for 11 years, told me. "I'm opposed to war and sanctions because it hurts Iranian people on the ground. It stifles the voices for change. It stifles the message for human rights inside Iran."

Noting the rare opposition figures that have wondered if sanctions will pressure the regime, [others have pointed out](#) that perhaps Iranian activists can't speak out publicly for concern out of their safety. But Tahmasebi, who came to the U.S. recently for a visit and was [given an award](#) by Human Rights Watch, said that Iranian activists' opposition to war and sanctions are principled human rights positions. "Human rights activists have to be transparent to ensure that their voices are credible at home. And they have to be consistent with their message," she told me. "In public and in private, they have been consistent in their opposition to sanctions and war because they are an extension of human rights abuses. They only serve to hurt human rights in Iran."

Nonetheless, Gerecht called for communications support for Iran's would-be opposition, and endorsed passive support for those who "are willing to risk their lives for the case of democracy." But those same people who "risk their lives" on the ground are almost universally against Gerecht's policy proscriptions for Iran. To couch one's unabashed support for bombing Iran as a vital security interest for the U.S. and its allies [despite the warnings](#) of current and former top Pentagon brass is one thing (and raises issues not discussed herein). But to simultaneously endorse war and those who insist it will hurt them is quite another.

Gerecht can't have his [Keik-e Yazdi](#) and eat it too.

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