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## Dealing with Iran

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Akbar Ganji is someone U.S. officials should heed when it comes to policy toward his native Iran. Ganji, a writer and journalist who became the fifth biennial recipient of the Milton Friedman Award for Advancing Liberty on May 13, hasn't just talked the talk when it comes to working to establish a democratic Iran, he has walked the walk far beyond what most people could endure. During the late 1990s, he presented evidence that the mullahs were behind the assassinations of exiled Iranian dissidents and had committed various other outrages. For his efforts, he served six years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement, and suffered tortures that Persians had perfected over the centuries.

If there was ever a person who had every right to endorse a U.S.-led campaign to oust the current Iranian regime, Akbar Ganji is that person. And yet he cautions American officials to adopt a very different course.

He argues that U.S. policies in the region and Washington's militaristic rhetoric have "fanned the flames of Islamic fundamentalism." Ganji is especially critical of George W. Bush's administration, but he stresses that the problem is a long-standing one. Indeed, as a nineteen-year-old student, he was a participant in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which he describes as primarily motivated by anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiments that arose because of U.S. support for the shah.

Ganji warns that saber-rattling over the nuclear issue worries and offends even pro-democratic Iranians. In fact, democratic activists concluded that they had to scale-back their criticism of the regime, lest they inadvertently encourage a U.S. military assault on their country. The mullahs also use indiscreet comments from American officials as a pretext to smear the opposition as CIA stooges and to justify crackdowns.

It is not just U.S. threats regarding Iran's nuclear program that Ganji finds counterproductive. When American officials express support for regime change, or even when they publicly endorse demonstrators and other regime opponents, that approach is "detrimental" to secular democratic forces.

Good intentions don't change that outcome. For instance, when Congress appropriated \$75 million to promote regime change, the clerics immediately accused democracy advocates of being on the U.S. payroll.

The reality was that \$30 million went to fund Voice of America, and most of the remainder, according to Ganji, was absorbed by various U.S. bureaucracies. Yet democratic factions ended up being viewed with

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suspicion by fellow Iranians as though they had actually taken money from the American government.

Clumsy U.S. policies helped bring the mullahs to power, and equally clumsy policies may extend their reign. Ironically, prominent hawks like Joe Lieberman and John McCain are the best friends that the Iranian regime could imagine.

Patience and a low American profile is a better approach. It is appropriate to criticize the Iranian government's human-rights abuses, but even that needs to be done carefully. And such efforts should never be linked to calls for regime change.

Ganji stresses that 75 percent of Iran's population is under thirty-five years old. To them, the Islamic Revolution is merely a historical event, not a burning cause. Moreover, the focus of their growing discontent is far more on the mullahs and their dreary, mismanaged rule than on the United States. Ganji notes that most young Iranians prefer a modern, secular lifestyle and pursue one to the extent they can get away with, much to the clerical leadership's frustration. Tellingly, the religious hierarchy now seems to regard all of Iran's universities as untrustworthy secular bastions.

Time is on the side of Iranian democrats—and on the side of Americans who want to see a more reasonable, perhaps even friendly, government take power in Tehran. But belligerent U.S. statements, much less the folly of launching a war against Iran, could easily derail that process. Instead of listening to the same armchair American hawks who brought about the debacle in Iraq, the Obama administration should take the advice of people like Akbar Ganji.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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