

The Worst Thing for Iran's Protesters? U.S. Silence

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We are now six days into [the Iran protests](#), and the questions that seized Washington during the 2009 pro-democracy movement have now once again come to the fore. Should the United States try to help Iran's protesters? *Can* we help them? Barack Obama's answers to those questions were clear: No, not really. His position, the one now echoed by many Western liberals, is based on a deeply misguided premise that the current regime can be reformed or moderated. It can't — and that premise should be abandoned if we want to do right by Iran.

When you read comments about Iran it's helpful to mentally substitute the names of other disreputable regimes. On Sunday, for example, former Secretary of State John Kerry tweeted the following about the Iranians who have taken to the streets to protest their theocracy: "With humility about how little we know about what's happening inside Iran, this much is clear: it's an Iranian moment and not anyone else's."

Would Mr. Kerry have said the same about Poland under Communism or black South Africans under apartheid? Would anyone in good conscience or with any strategic insight have recommended that the correct approach for Washington toward Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski or Prime Minister P.W. Botha was to remain quiet and do nothing? What explains this glaring moral incongruity on the part of so many Westerners when it comes to Iran?

For American liberals, it usually goes back to the C.I.A.-supported 1953 coup against the Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. That is the paralyzing original sin that limits the possibilities of American action or even strong rhetoric. Harry Truman's ultimatum to the Soviets to leave Iran after World War II and John F. Kennedy's policy of pushing Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to adopt reforms are usually overlooked. The failure of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to restrain the shah's delusional ambitions when it mattered most aren't cited as examples of "Iranian moments" where Washington was right to do nothing.

This reflexive belief that the United States is more apt to do wrong than right in Iran is today reinforced by a palpable anxiety on the American left that any serious support for the pro-democracy demonstrators could slide into new sanctions that could threaten Mr. Obama's nuclear deal. To put it another way, a (temporary) suspension of the clerical regime's nuclear ambitions is seen as more important than the possibility that democratic dissidents might win their struggle against Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his religious dictatorship.

Fear for the survival of the nuclear deal dovetails with an entirely mistaken idea about Iran that has driven much American and European policy since the 1990s: that the Islamic Republic can evolve from theocracy to a more traditional, nonthreatening authoritarian regime or even to democracy. This hope reinforces the view that Washington needs to keep its distance from dissidents or risk compromising their position in Iranian society. "Authentic" politically viable Iranians are thus anti-

American since they have to negotiate with and cajole the hard-liners into accepting reform.

This awful Western analysis has Iranian progenitors. In the 1990s, the Iranian left hoped that the Islamic Republic's theocracy could give way gradually to something kinder and democratic. They were exhausted but still faithful revolutionaries, tired of the internal violence and the war that had birthed the Islamic Republic's police state. The intellectuals of this movement often retained much of their revolutionary, anti-American fire.

The unexpected triumph of the mild-mannered, bookish, Occident-curious Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election fueled the possibility of change. But the regime's attack on student demonstrators demanding free speech in 1999 — Mr. Khatami failed to defend them, while Hassan Rouhani, Iran's current "moderate" president, threatened them with death — brought an end to any organized reform movement.

The longing for change among the Iranian people hasn't abated, however. The 1979 revolution had two contradictory ambitions: clerical Islamism and democracy. As theocracy has lost its appeal, the attraction of democracy, ever more secular in its expression, has spread from the college-educated to the working class.

The Obama administration, like so many well-intentioned Western journalists and scholars, locked onto this hope for gradual transformation from theocracy to democracy even though within Iran it had been shattered. The death of this dream was the electoral triumph in 2013 of Mr. Rouhani, a founding father of the regime's dreaded Intelligence Ministry. Iranians, who would surely down theocracy in a free vote, have a political system that gives them the option of voting for Mr. Rouhani or even more distasteful candidates.

Many Americans still want to believe that the Islamic Republic can peacefully evolve into something less malign. After all, American foreign policy is much more difficult if Iran remains an aggressive theocracy. The nuclear deal seems less astute if, when the sunset clauses kick in and the atomic restrictions start coming off in six years, Iran has tens of thousands of loyal Shiite militiamen spread across the Middle East and has increased the capacity of its long-range ballistic missiles.

But as Misagh Parsa of Dartmouth has written in "Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed," a depressing but essential read, gradual change isn't in the offing. The demonstrators in the streets of Iran today instinctively know this, which is why they rail against the system, chanting: "Death to Khamenei! Death to Rouhani!" These brave men and women deserve America's rhetorical and material support. They expected in it 2009 after President Obama's Cairo speech, in which he called for human rights in the Muslim world, but it never came.

This time around, the Trump administration can do better. The president's tweets in support of the protesters were a good start. Washington should also let loose a tsunami of sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards, the linchpin of Iran's dictatorship. Policy-wise, that would be a good place to start.

Contrary to received wisdom, the absolute worst thing that the United States can do for the Iranian people is to stay silent and do nothing.

Iranians Turn to Telegram App Amid Protests

People have used the messaging tool to share information and videos

Nearly a decade ago, a then-fledgling internet tool played a starring role in a protest movement that swept Iran, with organizers and witnesses communicating with each other, and the rest of the world, via [Twitter](#) .

“Telegram has been the most important tool for many Iranians to access uncensored news and information,” said Fereidoon Bashar co-director of ASL19, a Canada-based research and tech lab that helps people in Iran access information. Sharing news and information has become important during the protests, which have evolved without centralized leadership, Mr. Bashar said.

Iranians’ use of social media to facilitate [protests](#), and the government’s efforts to block them, represent the latest moves in a cat-and-mouse game that has played out in several countries in recent years.

The Iranian government has moved to rein in protesters’ ability to organize and communicate. It is restricting access to Telegram and Instagram, the photo-sharing site owned by [Facebook](#) Inc., state media has reported. The semiofficial Iranian Labor News Agency reported over the weekend that authorities had ordered blockages of mobile and landline internet access in areas near protests or antigovernment gatherings.

In response, Iranians have ramped up their use of circumvention tools to allow apps like Telegram to function, according to activists and developers of the tools.

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the U.S. is calling on Iran to stop blocking social-media sites and to respect the rights of protesters to speak freely in public and online.

“When a nation clamps down on social media...we ask the question, ‘What are you afraid of?’” she said.

Telegram’s chief executive, Pavel Durov, said in a statement over the weekend that the government was blocking access to Telegram for the majority of Iranians. He said the move came after the company refused to shut down channels in which protesters posted information about gatherings, including one that was giving times and places for protests and distributing videos of unrest. He said Telegram shut down one channel that violated Telegram’s rules against calls for violence.

Mr. Durov and a Telegram spokesman didn’t respond to requests for comment on Tuesday. A spokesman for Instagram declined to comment. An Iranian government representative didn’t respond immediately to a request for comment.

Access to uncensored communication tools—including Twitter Inc.’s service—helped fuel the protests that swept Iran in 2009, by allowing protesters to share news and organize gatherings using [services outside government control](#).

Protesters used Twitter, Facebook and other new platforms during the Arab Spring uprisings that erupted in 2011.

Since then, Iran and other countries including China, Turkey and Russia have increased their efforts to police the internet. In many cases they use technological filters—similar to those companies make to thwart cyberattacks—to spot and censor traffic they don’t like.

Those filters have led to a technical arms race. Governments make or buy subtler and more effective filters. Activists and protesters use an evolving set of technologies to redirect or obfuscate their internet traffic and thereby sidestep the blockades.

Telegram has become a favorite because of its perceived privacy. It is a messaging app, similar to Facebook-owned WhatsApp, that can be used on a smartphone or computer. It touts its speed and security; users can set messages to self-destruct on its “secret chat” feature. Using this function, Telegram users can choose to have messages encrypted, so even Telegram doesn’t have access to the data.

Non-“secret chat” messages are essentially split up and stored on Telegram servers throughout the world. Telegram says it would take court orders from several countries to force the company to give up data. In addition to sending messages to individuals and groups, users can create or join “channels” to broadcast to large audiences.

Telegram has come under fire in the U.S. and Europe, where authorities have accused it of helping disseminate terrorist propaganda, as well as [allowing encrypted communication](#) between terrorists.

Telegram has said that banning encrypted messages to deter terrorism wouldn’t work because extremists would find other ways to covertly communicate.

Mr. Durov, Telegram’s 33-year-old founder and owner, has marketed his privately held company to people suspicious of governments. He founded Russia’s equivalent of Facebook, VKontakte, but left Russia after government pressure. He started Telegram in 2013.

Telegram, which is free, doesn’t sell ads and says it isn’t interested in making a profit. The company says it is supported by Mr. Durov’s personal money.

In a 2016 interview, Mr. Durov said he and a small group of Telegram programmers didn’t have a permanent home in part because they didn’t want to be beholden to one country’s regulations. He said they rented accommodations in a city for weeks at a time before moving onto another. Recent homes had included Barcelona, Berlin, and London.

—*Felicia Schwartz and Asa Fitch contributed to this article.*