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IRAN'S NEW CIVIC AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf, Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, it is an honour for me to address this Commission, to represent Freedom House, and to be sitting here on this distinguished panel. Tom Lantos' clarity of commitment to human rights is an enduring inspiration—as is your continuing scrutiny of human rights issues.

Freedom House is one of the world's oldest human rights organizations. We were founded in 1941 to counter Nazi Germany's anti-democratic propaganda. Today, in addition to our well-known analyses on the state of [freedom in the world](#) and our [advocacy](#) for democracy, we work in a practical manner to support democratic activists in some of the world's most repressive societies, including Iran. I am very fortunate to work with some highly talented and committed colleagues who have provided exemplary support to Iranian dissidents and democrats.

In this testimony, I would like to examine the significant changes that have occurred in Iran's civic and political landscape since the June 12, 2009 presidential election. My focus is the protest movement, not the regime. The protest movement is the main driving force of Iranian politics. The emergence of the protest movement has led to a severe internal political crisis. The mass demonstrations of the summer of 2009 and the subsequent months of unrest have caused uncertainty and in-fighting within the regime, a level of internal discord that cannot be explained away as the usual ferment of Iran's theocracy.

Moreover, that sense of crisis has extended beyond Iran's borders. For all Iran's nuclear bluster and menace, regional perceptions of Iran have changed. Before the June 12, 2009 election the Iranian regime promoted itself as the new regional power, as a pillar of endurance in an unstable region. Today it looks frail and indecisive because of the protest movement. Before the election the regime claimed to possess some form of electoral legitimation and portrayed itself as a leader of the Middle East and of Muslim causes. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fiery anti-U.S. and anti-Israel rhetoric, often accompanied by his depraved Holocaust denial, apparently made him popular in some Arab states. Today, he looks like another electoral cheat and shabby dictator in a region that does not want for such characters.

These regime setbacks are protest movement successes. The courage and fortitude of Iranian protestors has imposed a political stalemate within Iran. These achievements have come at the cost of a human rights disaster and thousands of refugees who now live in dire circumstances.

Since June 2009, the regime has faced the most significant peaceful political challenge in its history, a challenge that exceeds that of the reformist administrations of the very cautious President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). This crisis has reignited the possibility of true democratic development in Iran.

This testimony will examine three elements of this change:

1. the reasons for the explosion of civic and political protest in Iran;
2. the characteristics of the protest movement; and,
3. how we can assist the protest movement.

1. Why is there an Iranian protest movement?

The mass protest movement in Iran stems from three major elements:

- i) popular fury at the blatantly stolen election of June 12, 2009;
- ii) the electoral campaign of Mir Hussein Musavi; and,
- iii) cultural, economic, ethnic, political and social discontent with the Islamic regime.

i) Popular anger at the theft of the June 12, 2009 presidential election.

Popular fury in response to the stolen presidential election of June 12, 2009 might seem odd at first glance. After all, Iran's electoral system is undemocratic. Elections have never been free and fair, have never met basic international standards, and often involve substantial irregularities. The Islamic Republic of Iran exercises intrusive control over the entire electoral process. Just four carefully vetted regime insiders were allowed to stand in the 2009 presidential election out of 476 applicants. No woman has ever been permitted to run. Only Shi'i Muslims can become president.¹ Nonetheless, in a manipulated and crooked system you can still steal elections.

The extent of the fraud on June 12, 2009 was such that in some areas Ahmadinejad's votes rose almost ten-fold over his tally in the 2005 elections. There was a magical increase in turnout in regions where election boycotts are widespread. Ahmadinejad supposedly won each of his three rivals' home provinces. Mehdi Karrubi, an opponent of Ahmadinejad and twice speaker of Iran's parliament, actually saw his vote in his home province of Luristan drop by 90%.² Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's so-called Supreme Leader, ascribed the record turnout to "the miraculous hand

¹ Article 115 of the constitution.

² An excellent analysis is Ali Ansari (ed.) with Daniel Berman and Thomas Rintoul, *Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election*, Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St. Andrews, June 21, 2009, available at <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/14234_iranelection0609.pdf>.

of God”—presumably because only a divine hand could have cast so many untraceable votes for Ahmadinejad.³

ii). The protest movement is an outgrowth of Musavi’s presidential election campaign.

Mir Hussein Musavi, Iran’s prime minister from 1981-9, was an unexpectedly popular presidential candidate who successfully mobilized support. The enthusiasm for Musavi in the closing days of the campaign contributed to the sense of fury at the stolen election and the subsequent desire for change. Many Iranians appear to have believed that Musavi could win and that he would institute an important change of tone from Ahmadinejad, even if changes in substance were expected to be modest.

Musavi’s campaign was enhanced by his strong performance in the pre-election debate on June 3, 2009. These debates were a novelty in Iran. Musavi performed well, while Ahmadinejad came across as a bully who was finally receiving his come uppance. Musavi calmly stated that Ahmadinejad was destroying Iran’s economy and foreign relations, and he accused the Iranian president of “superstition and adventurism.” On June 4, 2009, Musavi accused Ahmadinejad of “irrational management.” Zahra Rahnavard, Musavi’s wife, was active during the campaign—another first for Iranian electoral politics in which politicians’ wives have been almost invisible.

Regime intimidation also assisted Musavi by unifying the anti-Ahmadinejad vote. The regime pushed former President Mohammad Khatami to drop out as a potential candidate on March 16, 2009. Pro-regime thugs had attacked Khatami and the main pro-regime newspaper, *Keyhan*, had accused Khatami of plotting regime change and warned that he might end up like Benazir Bhutto.⁴ In a similar fashion, footage of Iranian police pulling down pro-Musavi posters under cover of darkness in the closing days of the campaign encouraged a sense that Musavi threatened the *status quo*, thereby making his candidacy more attractive.

The regime was so rattled by Musavi’s growing popularity that the Guardian Council, the unaccountable body that vets candidates, issued an election day ban on the use of the colour green and the Iranian flag (Ahmadinejad’s campaign symbol)—odd restrictions for a state that claims to be patriotic and Islamic.⁵

iii). Broad popular discontent with the Islamic Republic.

The mass protests also demonstrate the obvious—that many Iranians are deeply unhappy with their government. In economic terms, Ahmadinejad has failed to deliver a decent standard of living despite his 2005 promise to bring oil profits to the “dining tables” of Iranian homes.

³ *Mehr News Agency*, “Unprecedented Turnout Was A Miracle: Leader”, Tehran, June 14, 2009.

⁴ *Keyhan*, February 12, 2009. Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of *Keyhan*, later helpfully clarified that what his newspaper meant was to warn that the U.S. would assassinate Khatami as it had, he claimed, murdered Benazir Bhutto. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s “Supreme Leader” and theocratic leader, personally appointed Shariatmadari to his post.

⁵ Press TV, “Iran flag, green color banned on Election Day,” June 11, 2009, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=97713§ionid=351020101>.

Instead, around \$1bn of oil revenue is unaccounted for. Inflation remains high, many Iranians need multiple jobs to survive, the state sector is inefficient, and corruption is widespread.

Iranian discontent, however, exceeds economics. Large sections of Iran society are developing in different directions to those charted by the regime. In many small ways, Iranians defy the regime's Islamist blueprint for their lives. For example, the state promotes a restrictive view of women's role in society. Iranian textbooks promote a patronizing and regressive view of women as mothers and homemakers.⁶ The legal minimum age of marriage for women is just 13 (and can even be lower if a legal petition is made). In practice the average age at which Iranian women marry is rising and is now 24.⁷ This is because Iranian women are becoming more educated, more politically engaged, more civically organized, and Iran's poor economic performance makes starting a home an uninviting prospect. Women are now a majority of university students and an important part of the Iranian student movement. The face of the Iranian protest movement is Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26 year old woman murdered by the regime in broad daylight.

The protests were also an opportunity for popular reaction to the anti-reformist repression that began in earnest in 1999 and that accelerated under Ahmadinejad after 2005. That repression was a consequence of the regime's inability to allow for substantive compromises with Iranians who chafe at the Islamic Republic's restrictions. Another reason for the civil society crackdown that may have been in the back of the regime's mind is that a strong civil society can provide electoral scrutiny and prevent electoral fraud.

2. What is the Iranian protest movement?

The Iranian protest movement has four key characteristics:

- i. it is only nominally a movement as it lacks overt structure and active leadership;
- ii. it is broader than the "Green Movement;"
- iii. it is more credible than the "reformists" as it has a strong regional base and is ethnically diverse; and,
- iv. it is ideologically incoherent, including in its attitude to foreign policy.

⁶ Saeed Paivandi, "Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks," *Freedom House*, 2008, available at <http://www.gozaar.org/uploaded_files/IrantextbookE.pdf> and <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/press_release/IranTextbookAnalysis_FINAL.pdf>.

⁷ Nayereh Tohidi, "Iran," in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (New York: Freedom House; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), available at <<http://www.gozaar.org/template1.php?id=1343&language=english>>. For comparison, the average age at first marriage in the U.S. is now 25.7 years.

i). The protest movement is neither an organization nor even a campaign.

The protest movement is a “movement” largely in name, not in any meaningful organizational form. It lacks formal structure, channels of communication and genuine leadership. This lack of coherence is largely a result of state repression. From an organizational perspective Musavi and Karrubi are largely figureheads exercising little control. Consequently, there is an extent to which the unrest has a life of its own.

The first protests on June 13, 2009 were spontaneous eruptions of anger against electoral theft. Outside of Tehran and away from foreign journalists the regime used violence against these demonstrations. Musavi’s electoral campaign, and members of sympathetic political and civil society groups, then organized peaceful large-scale protests in Tehran the following week. Members of political organizations, such as the Islamic Participation Front, used their network within this party and other contacts to help turnout millions of demonstrators—although as a party the Islamic Participation Front and other bodies were not formally involved. The regime responded with arrests of possible protest leaders, a broad category, and the large scale use of security forces in Tehran on June 20, 2009.

The Iranian regime has since the summer systematically attacked any groups that might possibly be part of the protest movement and has arrested their members. Very little is now left of Musavi’s election campaign organization. Many of his top key aides are in prison or neutralized by regime intimidation and surveillance. Even fewer of former President Mohammad Khatami’s associates are at liberty—although most had no connection to the protests. Musavi and Karrubi are isolated and dependent upon the regime for their personal security.

Despite this, the protest movement has been resilient. From July 2009 until January 2010, the protest movement repeatedly surprised the regime with large numbers of demonstrators in major cities and towns across Iran. The protestors adapted to the regime’s consistent use of violence. They stopped organizing their own demonstrations, instead taking advantage of regime rallies, demonstrations, and commemorations (13 Aban; 16 Azar), or public religious festivities (Tasua and Ashura).⁸ This trend stopped on 22 Bahman⁹ when the regime successfully suppressed demonstrations through the massive presence of the security forces, by bussing in thousands of regime supporters, and thanks to the mistakes of some protestors.

The lack of formal leadership does not mean the movement is rudderless, but it does mean that it lacks unity. At the local level some leadership is emerging and is sometimes replaced following arrests. Musavi has facilitated this practical shift by stating that he is following the protestors, not placing himself at their head. He continues to provide general rhetorical direction to the Green Movement through his statements and interviews. Elements of leadership at the street level are probably being provided by those civil society movements that had survived the pre-2009

⁸ 13 Aban in the Iranian calendar is the anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by Islamic students in 1979 and of the shooting of anti-Shah protestors outside of the U.S. embassy in 1978. It fell on November 4, 2009. 16 Azar in the Iranian calendar is “Student Day” which commemorates the killing by the Shah’s police in 1953 of three students at Tehran University. Tasua is the fast that precedes Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali.

⁹ 22 Bahman in the Iranian calendar is the official commemoration of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which fell on February 11, 2010.

repression. Students in particular have been busy protesting since returning to their universities in late September 2009.

ii). The protest movement is wider than the Green Movement

It is important to recognize the differences between the Green Movement and the protest movement. Many of the demonstrators appear to have numerous grievances, many of which are non-political. The Green Movement was at the core of many of the post-June 12, 2009 demonstrations in central Iran. It represents the Musavi election campaign and the reaction to the stolen election of June 12, 2009. Since the autumn, however, it has become apparent that there are many demonstrators who are not necessarily associated with Musavi or his desire to reform the Islamic Republic from within. Instead, these demonstrators reject the religious regime and seek the end of the *velayat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent, the theocratic head of state). By contrast, Musavi now neither denounces the *velayat* nor embraces it, while Khatami and Karrubi accept it.

There has been a similar phenomenon on the periphery. Iran's ethnic minority demonstrators are largely driven by other factors and they have taken advantage of popular rejection of electoral fraud to mobilize. These ethnic minorities (Arabs, Baluchis and Kurds in particular) are pursuing their group and the national agendas simultaneously within the context of the protest movement.

The existence of a broader base than simply the pro-Musavi (and the smaller pro-Karrubi) groups is a restraint upon the politicians. The more radical sentiment of what is known as "the street" appears to have put pressure on Karrubi to clarify a statement in January 2010 that seemed to grant legitimacy to Ahmadinejad's presidency.

iii). The protest movement is more credible than the "reformists."

The protest movement is also more potent and credible than the "reformists" were under Khatami for social and political reasons. Unlike the "reformists" the protest movement is not as constrained by class, location and language. The protest movement draws upon the "reformists" and supplements them with a broader coalition characterized by different social, ethnic and sectarian groups. Core "reformists" are in the protest movement—intellectuals, academics, journalists, and some clerics. These groups tend to be Tehran-based, middle class and Persian and to a lesser extent Azerbaijani. Many are connected to Khatami and Karrubi. Khatami participates, although he remains very cautious and wary of political conflict. Karrubi's subordinate role makes those associated with him relatively marginal in terms of protest organization, although his sympathizers play an important intellectual role.

The student movement, and to a far lesser extent women's rights activists, are involved in the protest movement. Although students and women's rights activists were at various times involved with the "reformist" coalition, many became disillusioned with the "reformists," and Khatami in particular.

The protest movement is also able to mobilize in relatively small towns. Freedom House has concrete evidence from contacts in Iran and from other reports that there have been protests in 25 of Iran's 30 provinces. On key protest days, such as Qods Day, 13 Aban and 16 Azar, there were protests in major cities and in smaller towns across Iran, including on 13 Aban in such out of the way places as Arak (Markazi province), Shahrekord (Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province), and Kerman (Kerman Province).

Iran's ethnic minorities, who tend to be wary of national politics, are participating in the protest movement. These ethnic groups are wary of Musavi because of his record in the 1980s. Their involvement does not mean that the protest movement has settled Iran's ethnic issues, but that these are temporarily subordinate to larger demands for a more open society. The protest movement is therefore providing a semblance of unity that counteracts the disintegrative impact on Iran of the Islamic Republic's repressive practices against ethnic and religious minorities. While Persian is now more widely used than before the 1979 revolution, the sense of marginalization among Iran's ethnic minorities appears to have grown. Accurate figures on Iran's various ethnic groups are not available. Although minorities within Iran as a whole, these groups are majorities in their own areas and generally live along Iran's borders.

Regional developments are encouraging discontent. Iran's Kurds can see the growing political influence of Kurds in Iraq and Turkey's fitful attempts to integrate its Kurds politically. Iran's Baluchis are affected by the turmoil in neighbouring Pakistani Baluchistan. Iran's Shi'i Arabs, who live next to Iran's oil fields, can see that their fellow Shi'i Arabs in Iraq have been empowered and are sharing that country's wealth. Iran's large Azerbaijani population, which is socially and politically well integrated (Khamenei and Musavi are both Azerbaijanis), has increasingly asked for more cultural rights and mother tongue education. Even Ahmadinejad has acknowledged this discontent by promising increased education in ethnic languages.

The participation of the ethnic minorities in the peaceful protests also provides an alternative to violence. Although Iran is an exporter of terrorism, it has recently been on the receiving end of terrorist attacks by PJAK (a Kurdish group) and Jundullah (a Baluchi group whose leader was recently arrested).¹⁰ Neither group appears to have a strong base of support among Iran's Kurds or Baluchis. The regime's response to terrorism has been ferocious and there has been a series of retaliatory hangings of Baluchi and Kurdish prisoners, many of whom appear to have little or no connection to the terrorists.

iv). The protest movement has yet to develop a clear platform.

It is difficult to characterize the protest movement's politics. The protest movement is largely defined by what it opposes (Ahmadinejad), than what it favours. Until recently, this negative approach worked well. However, it will be a problem in the future that there is no agreement on the constitution, democracy, human rights, religious rights, the future of the *velayat*, the future of

¹⁰ Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), an affiliate of the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish terrorist group—both are U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Jundullah (Soldiers of God) is a Baluchi jihadist group.

the Islamic Republic, or the nature of Iran's foreign policy. As a political issue, not as a grievance, the stolen election of June 12, 2009 is largely over following Musavi's statement indicating a possibility for compromise involving a commitment to the integrity of future elections.¹¹

On key issues there is much promise but insufficient clarity. We know that the protest movement wants an Iran in which there is greater freedom. The protest movement and the Green Movement are clearly communicating to use that they are more reasonable than the regime. What that more accommodating approach would mean in practice is uncertain. We should be careful of rose-tinted analyses and bogus opinion polls that claim to tell us what Iranians think. The point is that Iranians should be able to express themselves in the only opinion poll that really counts and that is worth analyzing: a democratic election.

With regard to democracy and human rights, it is overly optimistic to call the protest movement an Iranian democratic movement. The Green Movement element of the protest movement is associated with Musavi, who had a dreadful human rights record in government. Musavi is an accidental dissident. He started his presidential campaign pledging little change, just better management. As the campaign wore on, he rejected Ahmadinejad's reckless economic and foreign policies. Since June 12, 2009 he has relentlessly attacked Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's "Supreme Leader," while claiming he wants to restore the pristine glories of the Islamic Revolution. In a recent interview, Musavi bemoaned the failure of the 1979 revolution to lead to true change in Iran and denounced religious dictatorship. Musavi's evolution is encouraging. Regime obduracy is transforming Musavi from Iran's Andropov into a potential Sakharov.

The same applies to many of Musavi's leading aides. Like Musavi, they threaten the regime because they are true insiders. They are experienced politicians and organizers. At the same time, their commitment to democracy is highly suspect. They are more likely to be motivated by the prospect of power than genuine political change. For example, Ali Akbar Mohtashimi-pur, the head of Musavi's vote protection committee, is a very capable politician and strategist. He helped to create the Lebanese terrorist group Hizballah.¹²

Similarly, some of the more traditionalist elements, in particular the "religious reformists," are ambiguous in their commitment to democratic values and human rights. Five leading "religious reformists" published their own manifesto in January 2010.¹³ These five thinkers soon fell out among themselves and their credibility is suspect due to their own ambiguous comments in the past about human rights, in particular religious freedom for Iran's long suffering Bahá'ís. Interestingly, their desire to reform the system from within was called into question by Musavi's statement that "dictatorship in the name of religion is the worst kind."¹⁴

¹¹ Mirhussein Musavi 17th statement, *kaleme.org*, December 31, 2009, available at <http://www.kaleme.org/1388/10/11/klm-7047>> translation available at http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=231350482605>.

¹² Meir Javedanfar, "Hezbollah's Man in Iran," *Tehran Bureau*, November 24, 2009, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/11/hezbollahs-man-in-iran.html>>.

¹³ Robin Wright, "Abdolkarim Soroush on the Goals of Iran's Green Movement," *The Huffington Post*, January 7, 2010, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-wright/abdolkarim-soroush-on-the_b_414882.html>.

¹⁴ Mirhussein Musavi interview with *kaleme.org*, February 2, 2010, available at <http://www.kaleme.org/1388/11/13/klm-10327>>, translation available at http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=283762677605>.

What is encouraging is that the protest movement now appears to be driven by activists calling for greater openness and freedom. These elements within the protest movement clearly want a less repressive system of government that will provide greater respect for human rights and free elections. Many of these activists are genuine democrats and dissidents, particularly those from civil society groups such as students and women's rights activists. This new generation could ultimately lead Iran away from dictatorship.

The attitude to the U.S. is mixed. Some of the intellectual leaders of the Green Movement are anti-American. Musavi is also no great fan of the United States, but he is clearly communicating that were he in power his foreign policy approach would be more rational and involve a greater willingness to discuss the many problems that Iran creates than Ahmadinejad's rejectionist approach. A willingness to discuss does not translate into an increased possibility of agreement, as the dire history of 18 years of EU engagement with Iran demonstrates.

By contrast, many demonstrators have been at pains to challenge regime foreign policy. The Qods (Jerusalem) Day protests were particularly courageous. Qods Day is a centrepiece of regime propaganda and the desire to place Iran at the head of the "Muslim World" and against Israel. Protestors turned out in force and shouted slogans against the Islamic regime's friends such as "Death to Russia", "Death to China", "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, my life for Iran!" In one video, two lonely pro-regime demonstrators paraded a picture of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah past a crowd of protestors who responded by booing and chanting "Death to the Dictator."¹⁵ These street challenges to Iranian regime support for Lebanese and Palestinian terrorist groups are important and encouraging. Moreover, some of the slogans were in English. As Roya Boroumand, a human rights activist, has said: "Ask yourself why Iranians who protest in the street write things in English. They're not just practicing language skills."¹⁶

There was a similarly broad range of protests on 13 Aban. Protestors again denounced the Islamic regime. They also challenged the U.S. to either side with them or the regime, shouting "Obama, Obama are you with us or with them?"¹⁷

3. How we can assist the protest movement

For all its durability and breadth, the protest movement faces considerable obstacles. Regime repression has been ferocious, characterized by unrestrained violence against peaceful protestors, mass show trials, isolation and threats. The suppression of demonstrations on 22 Bahman was a regime victory. However, we should not make the mistake of discounting the protest movement and thereby undermining one of the most important and positive civic and political changes in the Middle East for decades. The triumphalism of Ahmadinejad apologists notwithstanding, the regime continues to be divided and uncertain.

¹⁵ 27 Shahrivar Qods Day Poster of Seyyed Hussein Nasrallah Death to the Dictator, *YouTube*, September 18, 2009, available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfYnX5YaboM>>.

¹⁶ David Feith and Bari Weiss, "Denying the Green Revolution: The State Department cuts off funding to support Iran's democrats," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2009, available at <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704224004574489772874564430.html>>.

¹⁷ Obama ya ba oona ya ba ma - 13 aban iran - 4 nov," *YouTube*, November 4, 2009, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UluBN_Cl2s>. These slogans are also a play on the U.S. president's surname.

There are two main ways in which we can legitimately and safely assist the protest movement: by raising human rights concerns vigorously and through focused practical assistance. First, those countries that are serious about human rights can repeatedly and relentlessly raise Iranian human rights violations, whether in bilateral diplomacy or in international fora. They can press for the release of political prisoners and ask that Iran hold the perpetrators of human rights abuses to account. The speech of Michael H. Posner, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, to the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review on Iran was a useful U.S. initiative.¹⁸ The French government has also been vocal on human rights abuses in Iran.

As part of this effort, western countries can broaden the range of “engagement” on their own terms. Western countries can talk about human rights in Iran in public, whether raising the case of the American hikers (Shane Bauer, Josh Fattal and Sarah Shourd)¹⁹ or domestic abuses, while discussing nuclear issues and terrorism with the Iranian regime in private. Western countries should be careful that the regime does not manipulate the nuclear issue so that it can avoid discussing human rights abuses. The regime exploits rhetorical confrontation with the West as a means of distracting attention from its human rights record. Western countries can also tell the Iranian regime that their lack of trust in its nuclear assurances is connected to its atrocious human rights record. There is a strong argument that the reason why we talk of an “Iranian threat” is because a regime that gladly murders its own people in public is similarly unhesitant about exporting terrorism to Argentina, Iraq, Israel and Lebanon and has no compunctions about threatening to destroy a UN member state.

Second, we can have considerable impact by assisting the protest movement to offset its weaknesses in the face of regime repression. We should do this for three reasons:

- i) such programmes are effective and we know where we can help;
- ii) meaningful change in Iran requires assisting the genuine democrats and dissidents; and
- iii) Iranians are willing to work with these programmes.

i). Western government-funded programmes to assist civil society in Iran have been effective. We know that protest organizers have been using peaceful civic protest manuals that foreign-funded programmes have made available. One translated and localized manual has been distributed in thousands of copies and reposted repeatedly online. Many of the techniques in this manual are offline and not vulnerable to regime control of communications. Similarly, western government-funded programmes have assisted Iranians with broadcasting footage of protests and human rights abuses and with circumventing internet censorship.²⁰

An example of how we can assist is with communications. The protestors lack reliable communications. Their relative isolation from foreign civil society is evident from the naïveté with which many have used technology—a result of years of the Iranian regime demonization of

¹⁸ U.S. Statement: Human Rights Council UPR of Iran, February 15, 2010 available at <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2010/02/15/iran-upr/> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/DigitalOutreachTeam#p/u/0/mYDu26YZUeI>.

¹⁹ More details on their case are available at <http://freethehikers.org/>.

²⁰ For more on internet freedom issues in Iran, see Freedom House, “Iran Internet Freedom Report,” March 30, 2009, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=384&key=201&parent=19&report=79>.

any connection to foreign civil society. We can also assist the protest movement with digital protection practices. The web, Facebook, mobile telephony, SMS and Twitter are all wonderful tools for mobilizing. They are also public and vulnerable to attack. However, there is a steady and determined effort by the regime to deny access to these tools, to infiltrate protest networks, and create an electronic map of the opposition.

ii). Another important reason for these programmes is that they ensure that democratic and pluralist ideas play a role in the Iranian civic and political debate. A key aspect of pluralism is cultivating debate and demanding that multiple voices are heard. Iranian opposition media are fragmented and partisan, providing little opportunity for independent debate. The protest movement has considerable potential and many genuine dissident and democratic elements. If change is to mean more than a different face controlling the same repressive state, then we should be facilitating this debate and free expression.

iii). Western countries can, and should, assist the protest movement. The established practice of *bona fide* international assistance groups is to play a supporting role, to follow the lead of local activists and to provide the assistance that these activists request and can use effectively. Doubts have been expressed about whether Iranians will even want U.S. assistance. Our experience disproves this. To cite just one example, the Freedom House's bilingual website *Gozaar* has published dissidents who live inside Iran since 2007, even though *Gozaar* had received Dutch and U.S. government funding. It is therefore false to claim that patriotic Iranians will not work with Americans or international NGOs or U.S. and other international programmes. To make such claims denigrates brave dissidents and diminishes the excellent work that U.S. and other western government-funded programmes have achieved in Iran and around the world. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that the Islamic regime has always accused its opponents and dissidents of working for the U.S. and other foreign powers. Indeed, the regime has accused its nearest and dearest of being in the pay of the U.S. when it needed to liquidate them. The regime also accuses others who had nothing to do with U.S. or other foreign-funded programmes of being American and foreign agents. Interestingly, while some people were intimidated in the past into avoiding foreign-funded programmes, attitudes have changed since then thanks to the regime's uncompromising stance.

Outsiders should be careful not to increase the risks that Iranian activists run. Not increasing the risk does not imply inaction. The democratic world should not let Iranian regime propaganda prevent our assisting Iranian activists who want our support. From the perspective of human rights and civil society, slogans such as "first, do no harm" are vapid, harmful and morally evasive. They boil down to stating that we are content to be neutral between an evil, repressive government and its overwhelmingly peaceful civic opposition. When it comes to Iran, neutrality is not an option because it means silence in the face of rampant human rights abuses.

Finally, from a long-term perspective, it makes sense for western countries to have Iranian partners who know that we have supported them. Brave Iranians are defying a regime that others fear to cross. To sit back and do nothing is to be complicit in their repression and possibly their defeat, when instead we can actively contribute to Iranians building the most positive changes in their country in decades.