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# The President Snubs Iran's Democrats

Nuclear negotiations aren't worth this price.

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By **AKBAR ATRI AND MARIAM MEMARSADEGHI**

Today marks the 30th anniversary of the taking of American hostages by radical Islamists during Iran's 1979 Revolution. Every year, the theocracy celebrates the occasion with orchestrated demonstrations against the United States, complete with the requisite burning of the American flag and chants of "Death to America."

But this year, the regime's anti-Americanism is being boldly confronted. Democratic organizers are subverting the day's tightly controlled activities with their own planned rallies featuring a day-long message of apology and friendship to the U.S. The brave Iranian women and men fighting for an open society are intent on showing the West that they are ashamed of the regime's violence and the pain the American people experienced 30 years ago.

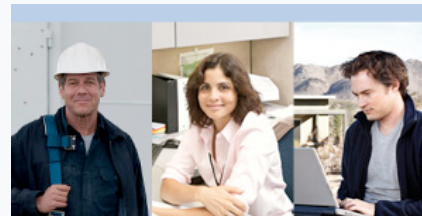
One of us, Akbar, served in the leadership of Tahkim Vahdat, the very organization that took Americans hostage three decades ago. During the late 1990s when Akbar was involved, activists in favor of a liberal society that embraces modernity struggled to become the leading voices of the student movement. Despite incessant state surveillance, intimidation and imprisonment, we managed to turn Tahkim Vahdat inside out—from a tool of regime control into a leading voice for democratic opposition. We see today's movement as the fruit of seeds we planted over a decade ago.

Yet courageous and dignified overtures to the U.S. by Green Movement activists have been snubbed by the Obama administration. The administration has avoided discussion about the prospects for liberalization in a country that exports radical Islamist ideology throughout the Middle East and beyond. In regressive realpolitik fashion, it has grown increasingly reticent about the Iranian people's struggle for human rights, apparently viewing it as irrelevant to U.S. security interests. Rather than bolstering the opposition at a time when the Iranian regime is at its weakest, America is pursuing a policy of appeasement.

In response to President Obama's eagerness to strike a deal with the Iranian regime, Green Movement activists are offering a compelling alternative. Their slogan? "America! Obama! From us an apology, from you support!"

Many Iran experts have warned that displays of Western solidarity could taint Iran's democrats. Nonsense. Iranian cyberspace is brimming with anger at what the Green Movement sees as betrayal by the West. From legendary filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi's representative in Europe, to Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, Iranian democrats are expressing disappointment at what they see as the trading of their democratic aspirations for dubious progress toward the goal of preventing a nuclear Iran.

"Engagement," it turns out, is about nuclear weapons alone—no matter how many innocent Iranians are being beaten, tortured, raped and killed for expressing their hope for change. The Islamic Republic is none too pleased with America's new insistence on talking. President



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Ahmadinejad boasts on state media about his breakthrough achievement—getting respect and deference from the U.S.—while he proceeds to reject already watered-down nuclear proposals.

Can the Obama administration achieve anything with Ahmadinejad's cabal on the nuclear front that could possibly justify its betrayal of the Iranian people and American values? We think not. And we believe the administration still has time to change course and not lose the faith of a people longing to join the Free World.

In practical terms, regaining the trust of young Iranian democrats will require: publicly pressing the Iranian regime to respect human rights; integrating discussion of the regime's treatment of its opposition in all formal negotiations; reviving U.S. government funding to support the Internet, free media, people-to-people exchanges, and training on civic engagement; and leveraging the popular Voice of America and Radio Farda broadcasts to directly express American solidarity with the Iranian people.

Doing otherwise risks further alienating the democrats, while giving the Iranian regime time to obfuscate and further build its nuclear capacity. Surely this is not the sort of engagement that Mr. Obama would want to be his legacy.

**Mr. Atri served in the leadership of the student movement Tahkim Vahdat from 1997 to 2005. Ms. Memarsadeghi is an adviser to democracy and human-rights promotion programs in the Middle East.**

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