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U.S. Policy Toward Iran In A Changing Middle East

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Ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has been a vexing foreign policy conundrum for the United States. The relationship turned acrimonious almost from the start of the revolution, when radical students backed by Ayatollah Khomeini seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held U.S. diplomats hostage for more than one year. Since the end of the hostage crisis in January 1981, there have been periods of optimism over a possible thaw in relations, but attempts at rapprochement have been repeatedly scuttled by the actions of Iran and Iran-backed militant groups, U.S.-Iran mutual misperceptions and suspicions, and politics in both governments. The continued estrangement is not due to public opinion in Iran or the United States; survey research in recent years in both countries has repeatedly shown that the people of both nations are not opposed to a restoration of relations.

When a popular uprising in Iran began in June 2009, ostensibly over the suspected regime fraud that resulted in the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the United States did not intervene to assist the uprising. Contrary to the belief of many experts and observers, it has not been official U.S. policy to attempt to change Iran's regime. Still, wide spectrums of political leaders in the United States were clearly hoping the uprising would succeed in ousting the clerical regime established more than 30 years earlier. The uprising was led by young, pro-Western, technology savvy youth that organized into what it called the "Green movement and the movement's ascendancy to power would have benefited the strategic interests of the United States enormously. Not least of which was the perception that the success of the Green movement uprising could have led to a compromise to halt or significantly limit Iran's nuclear program, which the United States strongly suspects has as its core objective the eventual development of a nuclear weapon.

The Green movement uprising achieved major successes in demonstrating the potential vulnerability of the regime, but the regime was able to regroup, adjust its tactics, and take advantage of the limitations of the Green movement's power base. The Green movement was unable to draw into its rebellion a wide range of social groups, such as labor, rural inhabitants, and older Iranians, and the uprising was put down by the first months of 2010. Its titular leaders, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi and former Majles Speaker Mehdi Karrubi, although always viewed with suspicion by the harder line youth that wanted outright replacement of the regime, were placed under house arrest in early 2011.

The disappearance of the Green movement from the streets of Iran removed from the Obama Administration the burden of having to decide how to respond to the Green movement challenge inside Iran. Unlike in Libya, where the anti-Qadhafi rebellion took control of a major city, Benghazi, the Green movement in Iran did not build to the point where it was able to seize territory. The Obama Administration was not faced with a decision about whether to use force to protect the rebellion from retaliation by regime security forces.

With the dissipation of the Green movement, the Administration was able to shift its focus back to what had always been its core concern – the limitation of Iran's nuclear program. Iran rejected a nuclear deal with the United States and its partners in October 2009, and international suspicions of Iran's nuclear intent and revulsion at its unwillingness to compromise increased. Taking advantage of this opinion - which permeated even Russia and China, which were considered the most understanding of Iran's views - the Obama Administration was able to build international support for progressively strict economic sanctions against Iran. In mid-2010, a wide range of sanctions were imposed on Iran with little dissent, the centerpiece of which was U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, mandating several sanctions but granting authority for countries to impose sweeping sanctions on Iran's energy and financial sector. Such sanctions were imposed not only by the United States in the form of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA), but by the European Union, Norway, Australia, Canada, Japan, and South Korea. Never before had there been this degree of consensus in imposing sanctions that affect Iran's civilian economy.

Effect of the Arab Spring on Iran Policy

The 2010 sanctions were primarily intended to cause Iran to rethink its nuclear program - and not to bring about regime demise. However, CISADA and other initiatives did herald a new U.S. policy trend that has accelerated with the progress of the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in January 2011. CISADA contained a provision requiring the Administration to sanction Iranian officials responsible for human rights abuses related to the suppression of the protests against the handling of the June 2009 Iranian election. Other provisions of CISADA and other U.S. laws attempted to facilitate the Green movement's access to the Internet and other organizing technology. At the United Nations and other international fora, the Obama Administration, along with its European partners, became more vocal in criticizing Iran's human rights record.

However, these criticisms and designations have been the furthest the Administration has gone – it has not adopted an outright policy of “regime change,” and it has not abandoned efforts to achieve a nuclear deal with Iran. In several statements in 2009 and 2010, President Obama expressed solidarity with those struggling for freedom in Iran, but at no time did he call on Iran's leaders to resign. Even as international sanctions were being tightened, the United States and its partners sought to, and succeeded, in coaxing Iran into new rounds of nuclear talks in late 2010 and early 2011.

As soon as the Arab Spring began, the Administration, by all accounts, was assessing its implications for Iran. Many Administration officials believed that the Arab Spring was fueled by the same factors and techniques on display during the 2009 Green uprising in Iran, and that the Green movement would take the cue from its Arab neighbors and shake off its fear of regime security force repression. The Administration attempted to nudge events in that direction by openly disparaging Iranian leadership statements associating the Arab Spring with Iran's own 1979 Islamic revolution, when those leaders were at the same time continuing to suppress peaceful demonstrations inside Iran itself. Still, the Administration took no steps to directly assist or incite the Green movement to action as the Arab Spring began consuming longstanding dictators such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen.

The Administration posture on the Green movement in the context of the Arab spring could reflect an Administration calculation that the Green movement was so heavily suppressed as to have no chance of success, or it could have reflected an Administration belief that supporting the Green movement would prevent accomplishing the paramount objective of U.S. strategy toward Iran – halting or limiting its nuclear program. Administration officials counter both of these explanations – they say that a more public U.S. stance in favor of the Green movement would serve to discredit the movement inside Iran as “stooges” or puppets of the United States. Such an image, when acquired, has tended to be the death knell of any anti-regime movement in Iran.

Perhaps disappointed that the Arab Spring has not reverberated back into Iran in the form of a renewed uprising there, the Administration has sought to ensure that the Arab Spring does not end up strengthening Iran and its allies in the Middle East region. Judging from official U.S. statements, there has been substantial concern within the Administration that the Shiite-led uprising in Bahrain might produce a government there that realigns with Shiite Iran and potentially seeks to dismantle the U.S.-Bahrain joint security architecture centered on U.S. use of a large naval headquarters facility there. This concern might explain why the Administration has not supported the Al Khalifa regime's ouster despite its use of force against peaceful protesters. The concern about Iran's potential influence in Bahrain lay at the heart of a Saudi decision to send about 1,000 troops to Bahrain to help support a regime crackdown against the uprising there. The United States differed with the Saudis on the

intervention, but apparently only in strategy and tactics, and not in the overall objective of keeping the Al Khalifa in power.

Far from fearing that the Arab Spring will increase Iran's influence in the region, some in the Administration see opportunity in the Arab Spring to further isolate Iran. That opportunity has been provided by the popular uprising in Syria. It is hoped by many in the Administration, the Arab Spring might devour the one Arab dictator most closely aligned with Iran and Iranian policy – Bashar Al Assad of Syria. Doing so, and assuming Assad's demise were followed by the establishment of a youth-oriented democracy, would severely constrain Iran's efforts to support Hezbollah, and it is entirely conceivable that a democratic Syria might cause Israel to become more flexible in negotiating the return of the Golan Heights. Hamas, a key obstacle to a Palestinian peace with Israel, would also be weakened by Assad's fall and the more general decline of Iranian influence in the region. Many strategists believe that, even short of bringing down the Islamic regime in Tehran, the Arab Spring is still likely to end up significantly furthering U.S. goals in the region.

**This article was written in Dr. Katzman's personal capacity, and not in connection with his work as an expert with the Congressional Research Service.*