

Opinion

Fight Iran with a war of ideas

Empowering the country's dissidents, not military action, is the best way to weaken the Islamic regime.

By Azar Nafisi, February 15, 2007

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AZAR NAFISI is director of the Dialogue Project at the School of International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

THOSE WHO SEE a military attack on Iran as inevitable are relying on a specific interpretation and image of that country: Iran supports terrorism and develops weapons of mass destruction. The terms "WMD" and "terror" generate panic and fear, and the images coming out of Iran seem to justify those responses.

However, that is an incomplete picture, one that has been reduced to the Iran espoused by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his supporters: a belligerent president, a violent rhetoric, a denial of the Holocaust. In addition, some analysts and Iran experts say that the Iranian people have given up on change, that they have left the political arena, opting for economic wellbeing, and therefore there is no longer a real resistance against the Islamic regime.

Those who hold this narrow and dire view conclude that such conditions could lead to a military attack on Iran. But were we to include the full range of images and voices in Iran today in the scenario, we would see that Ahmadinejad's violent rhetoric abroad and repressive measures at home stem not from a position of strength but weakness.

Since his election, there have been two demonstrations by Iranian women and a campaign to gather a million signatures against the segregationist laws in Iran. There have been workers' protests in 10 cities since January, and others at universities, which Ahmadinejad has called the bedrock of "secularism and liberalism"; students have greeted him and his projects with slogans of "death to the dictator." He has been the target of severe criticism even within the ruling hierarchy, including the conservative camp. And he has been chastised in parliament for using bluster and violent rhetoric abroad to divert attention from domestic problems, especially dire economic conditions, inflation and unemployment.

Under such conditions, who would benefit from a military attack on Iran? Not the workers, students, minorities, women or the dissenters who have been trying to find nonviolent and democratic ways of resisting and changing the present system.

Such an attack would provide an excuse for the most reactionary and violent elements within the ruling elite to stifle any voice of dissent not just from within

the civil society, but from the divided and factional ruling elite. It would help rally factions within that elite behind Ahmadinejad, and it would provide Iran a good excuse to attempt to further isolate the United States within the international community.

In other words, the main beneficiary of an attack on Iran would be the most militaristic and reactionary elements in the Iranian ruling hierarchy.

As someone who has for years advocated that the best policy toward Iran is to support the Iranian people's democratic aspirations and that the only means of establishing pluralism and openness in that country is through democratic and nonviolent means, I emphasize once more that the best weapon democracies have against repressive regimes and against terror is not military but ideological and cultural. The most effective war against the tyrants in Iran is through giving voice to the workers asking for their rights, to women fighting for equality and to students, journalists, writers and intellectuals fighting for freedom of expression.

To miss this opportunity not only would be disastrous for the Iranian people, it would have dire consequences for the United States and the world.