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By Brian Binley



Iran's nuclear activities - this week ramped up with fresh plans to expand uranium enrichment - and its sponsorship of international terrorism pose an ever-growing threat that must be dealt with by the international community. A year after President Obama took office, his administration talks little of a policy of rapprochement toward Iran, and indeed, he has decided to strengthen the U.S. fleet in the Persian Gulf to counter what he clearly sees as a heightened threat. However, both the European Union and the Americans have wasted much time pursuing a policy of appeasement, which clearly has failed. If we had listened to the right people, we might not have wasted that time.

Maryam Rajavi, president-elect of the main opposition coalition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, announced during a visit to the European Parliament in December 2004 that Iran was like a volcano ready to erupt. That statement was made more than five years ago, and indeed, the volcano has erupted. Iranians have proved they are ready for change. Perhaps we should have listened a little more to Mrs. Rajavi.

The solution to the problem has, in fact, been spelled out by the people of Iran, who have visibly shown that they want internal democratic change. The question we need to ask ourselves is what the West should do to assist in that process as the regime prepares to battle renewed protests expected to launch on Thursday's anniversary of the 1979 revolution.

Ethical issues and economic weapons should be the key factors to pointing the way forward. War clearly is not a viable option. Nor is continued appeasement, not least because the mullahs' regime is incapable of making the concessions required to arrive at an acceptable agreement. Indeed, Iranian officials have admitted that in the current domestic situation, with an increasingly fragile regime, one step back could lead to the government's collapse. So the policy of appeasement we have so consistently pursued has become increasingly irrelevant.

We should, therefore, look to a third option, which has been proposed consistently by the Iranian opposition in exile as the way forward. The third option can be summed up very simply in two short phrases. First, world leaders should lift all political restrictions placed on the Iranian opposition. Second, we should impose a more restricting regime of tougher, comprehensive, targeted but binding sanctions on the mullahs' Iran.

There have long been arguments to the effect that sanctions would be disastrous for the Iranian people, to say nothing of Western businesses. However, those arguments need to be examined in more depth. Let's take the case of a comprehensive oil embargo.

First, the Iranian people are not benefiting from the oil revenues at present because Iran's leaders increasingly are using them to support international terrorism, a clandestine nuclear weapons program and a rigid policy of domestic repression. And who is to say how much has been lodged in Swiss bank accounts?

Second, the government pays a fortune to the paramilitary Basij forces, whose primary purpose is to instill fear by beating up people in the streets. Indeed, it could well be that the reduction of oil revenues could dry up the finances available for internal terrorism and would be welcomed by the millions who have demonstrated in recent months.

The potential effect of sanctions on the people of Iran should be seen in the context in which the Iranian people have been willing to take to the streets and risk losing their lives for freedom. Many of them will tell you that sanctions are a price worth paying.

In other words, the thought that sanctions could lead to war is, on balance, both wrong and self-deceiving. Many are convinced that tougher sanctions are, in truth, the only feasible way to avoid going to war with Iran over its nuclear defiance. To stop Iran's move toward a nuclear bomb is best attempted by cutting off the finances that support the project.

Many also would argue that sanctions do indeed have a proven record of success. They would say sanctions worked in South Africa against apartheid. They also might say that sanctions worked in Libya and helped persuade Libyans to abandon their nuclear ambitions. They even worked in Iraq by bringing an end to Iraq's nuclear weapons program, although this fact conveniently has been forgotten following the dodgy dossier that led to war.

Finally, tougher sanctions on Iran are economically much less costly than war. They would assist the Iranian people's desire for change, and they also would suit our own national interest. So why the hesitation? They are economically viable, ethically right and morally sustainable. Most of all, many Iranians tell me sanctions are the most effective way of helping them get rid of the evil regime that controls their country.

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