



# Obama And Iranian Freedom

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Is President Obama finally learning to love the idea of freedom in Iran? If the Administration's Persian New Year message is any indication, it is certainly starting to seem that way.

That video greeting, issued on March 20th to mark Nowruz, took a serious stand in support of Iran's opposition forces—and against its repressive regime. The Iranian government's heavy-handed response to the grassroots protests that have taken place throughout the country since the fraudulent reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the summer of 2009, Mr. Obama declared, demonstrate *that it cares far more about preserving its own power than respecting the rights of the Iranian people.*

*For nearly two years, there has been a campaign of intimidation and abuse. Young and old; men and women; rich and poor— the Iranian people have been persecuted. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience are in jail. The innocent have gone missing. Journalists have been silenced. Women tortured. Children sentenced to death.*

...

*These choices do not demonstrate strength, they show fear.*

That's a world apart from the Administration's previous Nowruz pronouncements, which have systematically reinforced the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic while skirting meaningful engagement with its captive population. And it suggests that, at long last, the White House has begun to realize that our problem with Iran has a great deal to do with the extremist religious ideology that prevails among its rulers.

But what, exactly, can the United States do about it? So far, policymakers in Washington have shown precious little interest in understanding what makes the Islamic Republic tick, or identifying the best way by which the West can undermine it. Rather, for years, America and its allies have tried in vain to alter Iran's behavior, proffering diplomatic carrots and brandishing economic sticks in a futile attempt to moderate its policies without addressing the corrosive ideology that undergirds them.

Here, a better understanding of Iranian history and culture can help. More than fifty years ago, the American philosopher Eric Hoffer famously observed that ideological mass movements, by their nature, are inherently competitive. They draw their adherents from the same groups of people, and hold out the same appeal of a different political order to their recruits. Therefore, Hoffer postulated, "The problem of stopping a mass movement is often a matter of substituting one movement for another."

The current Iranian leadership understands this very well. It is the reason why, since taking power in the late 1970s, Iran's religious revolutionaries have waged a persistent ideological war on Persian culture and nationalism. They have repeatedly attempted to marginalize Persian holidays in favor of those that extol Shi'a Islam. For years, they maintained a ban on naming Iranian children with pre-Islamic names, such as Darius and Cyrus. They have even attempted to destroy what is perhaps the greatest symbol of Iran's cultural heritage: the tomb of the great Zoroastrian King Cyrus, who lived from 576 to 530 BCE.

These efforts are logical. Iran, after all, is an ancient and proud civilization, with a history stretching back thousands of years. The Islamic Republic, on the other hand, is not. At just over three decades old, Khomeini's revolution is an ideological "Johnny-come-lately," with little historical legitimacy or authority. It's no wonder Iran's ayatollahs have systematically attempted to denigrate Persian nationalism; they simply can't compete with it.

All of which holds an important lesson for the West. By emphasizing the enduring appeal of Persian nationalism, the United States has the power to support a serious ideological alternative to the current regime in Tehran. Just as importantly, by doing so the U.S. can provide much-needed confirmation to ordinary Iranians that it understands their culture and supports their urge for freedom—thereby further weakening the ideological bonds that hold the Islamic Republic together.

To its credit, the White House has just taken the first step in this direction. In his Nowruz greeting, President Obama told Iran's youthful population: "you... carry within you both the ancient greatness of Persian civilization, and the power to forge a country that is responsive to your aspirations." That America now recognizes this fact might just be the best New Year's message of all.

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