



More Regime Change

April 7, 2003 **Ilan I. Berman** *National Review Online*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Iran

The battle for Iraq may still be far from over, but its impact is already sending shockwaves throughout the Middle East. Militarily, Washington's early successes have put to rest any lingering doubts about U.S. capabilities or American resolve. But more significant still is the example set by Iraq's impending liberation, and the accompanying realization that is taking root in the region — that Baghdad's fall could foreshadow even greater change.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Iran. After 24 years of the Islamic Revolution, Iran is nothing short of a failed state, complete with double-digit unemployment, rampant corruption and mounting domestic repression. And economically, the fiscal policies of the ruling clergy have all but bankrupted Iran and turned it into an international pariah. All this despite the fact that its proven oil and natural gas reserves place Iran at the head of the class as a global energy producer.

Just as important is the fact that Iran is in the grip of a fundamental demographic and political transformation: with two-thirds of Iranians now estimated to be under the age of 30, the bulk of the country's population has lived all of its life under the Revolution, and is distinctly aware of its deficiencies.

It is no wonder, then, that a groundswell of domestic opposition is emerging to the current regime. This was underscored last fall, when Iran's parliament, in an effort to shore up the anti-Western policies of its leaders, commissioned a poll to study national attitudes toward the United States. The results were intended to be a resounding confirmation of Tehran's antagonism to Washington, and a renewed mandate for the Islamic Republic's foreign and domestic policies. But Iran's leaders found out that they should be careful what they wish for: among some 1,500 Iranians, surveyed by no less than three different polling institutes, 74 percent supported the idea of dialogue with the United States, and nearly half affirmed that Washington's attitudes toward Iran are "to some extent correct."

Simultaneously, even the political consensus among Iran's religious establishment has begun to crumble. Back in July, the Ayatollah Jaleddin Taheri, a stalwart of the old regime, dropped a bombshell when he resigned from his post as the Imam of Isfahan. Taheri's letter of resignation, circulated widely in the Iranian press, blasted the "rising unemployment, inflation, high cost of living, ailing economy, government corruption and addiction" plaguing Iran on the "failed" politics of the current regime. Since then, in further proof that the Islamic Republic is fast approaching a major crisis, other clerics have followed suit, publicly breaking ranks with the Iranian establishment and calling for sweeping political and social reforms.

For these elements, the campaign against Iraq, a manifestation of the Bush administration's commitment to lasting change in the Middle East, is a much-needed shot in the arm. For Iran's hardliners, however, Washington's offensive poses an unprecedented challenge. Despite their growing marginalization, Tehran's mullahs have embarked on an increasingly aggressive Iranian foreign policy course, one that includes a mounting focus on ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction and an expanded strategic relationship with the Kremlin. And for all of his public calls for a "dialogue of civilizations" with the West, Iran's "reformist" president, Mohammed Khatami, has only aided and abetted these trends.

Now, the Iranian leadership, already coping with the fledgling U.S.-backed Karzai government in Afghanistan, is becoming painfully aware that it could soon find itself pinioned between two newly-liberalizing, Western oriented governments — a development that would severely constrict its recently reinvigorated ambitions in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Officials in Tehran also know full well that the example of a pluralistic post-Saddam Iraq could serve as a catalyst for change among Iran's own increasingly restive population.

While the United States and its Coalition allies are currently focused on Saddam Hussein's regime, policymakers in Washington should take stock of the fact that their gains there could decisively tip the scales in favor of democracy in Iraq's eastern neighbor. And if it is serious about translating its achievements in Iraq into a larger regional strategy, the Bush administration should clearly articulate its commitment to change in Tehran.

When it does, the White House is likely to find no shortage of attention in the Islamic Republic.