

The North Star National
February 9, 2010

Iran's tipping point?
By Lawrence J. Haas

With Washington paralyzed by snow and its chattering class focused on President Obama's changing fortunes, the next phase of a far more monumental story for both the United States and the world will play out this week in the Middle East.

Iran's regime and the opposition Green Movement are bracing for what could prove a decisive confrontation on February 11, the 31st anniversary of the 1979 revolution that replaced Iran's Shah with a clerical regime.

That regime, increasingly besieged from within Iranian society, is warning of severe reprisals for anyone who protests that day. Mir Hossein Mousavi and other opposition leaders inside and outside Iran remain defiant, however, questioning the regime's legitimacy after the rigged presidential election in June that sparked the Green Movement and urging Iranians to take to the streets in huge numbers.

The stakes could not be higher for Washington, for Iran's domestic drama is but one part of a complicated story whose multiple plot lines are heading toward a dramatic climax in the coming months.

- The regime is making more progress on a nuclear weapons program that, when operational, will strengthen its hold on power by making it impervious to outside pressure. Ignoring growing global outrage, the regime announced this week that it will enrich uranium at more advanced levels at its Natanz plant, moving it closer to a fuel cycle that can produce nuclear weapons.
- The Green Movement is seeking to overthrow a regime that's increasingly out of step with its people, curtailing freedom and providing few opportunities for a restive population. The United States and its allies hope a replacement government will abandon the nuclear program, or at least provide the transparency to assure the world that nuclear energy will not mean nuclear weaponry.
- Israel is urging the international community to apply the kind of pressure – financial and otherwise – that will convince the regime to abandon its nuclear program. But, in case the world fails to act, it is also preparing a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities to at least delay Tehran's progress.

Consequently, the Obama Administration and Washington's broader foreign policy establishment, which had pooh-poohed the chance of Iranian governmental reform (i.e., "regime change"), are increasingly pinning their hopes on that very thing to generate a host of benefits: No more Iranian nuclear threat, no need for a destabilizing Israeli strike, and perhaps even an end

to Iranian sponsorship of terrorism that will pave the way for a new Washington-Tehran relationship.

Nothing better symbolizes Washington's altered focus than a recent *Newsweek* column by Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and Washington's quintessential foreign policy "realist," which urged America and its allies to pursue an Iranian policy of "increasing the prospects for political change."

Normally, realists seek political stability and eschew concerns about how a regime operates within its own country. Neoconservatives, by contrast, sometimes seek what President Bush proudly called "regime change," for they believe that what a regime does to its own people is a tell-tale sign of the dangers that it presents externally. Haass's conversion was significant enough to engender a blizzard of attacks from fellow realists and an equally spirited crescendo of praise from normally hostile neoconservatives.

No one, of course, can confidently predict a regime's demise – the moment when a Soviet leader (e.g., Mikhail Gorbachev) will unleash the forces that will ultimately destroy an empire, or when a Philippine strongman (e.g., Ferdinand Marcos) will accept the challenge of a public plebiscite that will presage his demise.

Nor is Tehran's ruling mullah-crazy backing down from a fight. Quite the contrary, its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have both tied the expected protest of February 11 to U.S. and other foreign interference and vowed to strike crushing blows against it.

Beyond threats, the regime has taken a series of steps in recent days to lay the groundwork for further suppression, according to reports from Radio Free Europe and elsewhere. It has disrupted the nation's Internet and text-messaging systems, both of which are major communications tools for the opposition.

Moreover, the regime has replaced plastic street dumpsters with tougher metal ones, making it harder for protestors to set them on fire or use them to ward off police attacks; installed loudspeakers on streets, presumably to drown out the voices of protestors; and mobilized tens of thousands of security forces to confront the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who are expected to protest.

Beyond that, it has issued death sentences or jail time to leading opponents. It hanged two people last month after post-election trials, and it has issued six-year jail terms to at least four others who had served in the administration of former president, and current opponent, Mohammad Khatami.

But if the key to a safer world is regime change in Tehran, the question remains: What should the United States and its allies do to push it along?

Proponents offer a range of steps, from public expressions of solidarity with democratic activists by President Obama and other world leaders, to financial support for the activists from the

Iranian diaspora, to financial and other pressure on regime leaders and members of the hated Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

To be sure, the United States must walk a fine line. Because Iranians have not forgotten America's role in the 1953 coup that toppled their popular prime minister, America's leaders must express support for the activists and their aspirations without openly trying to orchestrate the needed democratic change.

But, a problematic history must not be a paralyzing one. Iran could be on the cusp of revolutionary change. The United States has a chance to help an opposition movement reach its tipping point – and make the world a far better place in the process.

This is no time for timidity.