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## **Our Friends in Iran**

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A deceptive calm has fallen on the streets of Iran's big cities after last summer's post-election repression. Although there is a veneer of restored order, the embers of rebellion still burn. The ayatollahs have missed their appointment with the hangman, but the question remains: for how long? The life of the Islamic Republic can be prolonged only by the crushing of its restive youth or by its attaining nuclear weapons. The latter may not ensure eternal life, but it can shield Iran from foreign enemies and enable Tehran to hold on to its subversive place in the sun for decades to come.

This is the challenge facing the West. If internal change can create a new, benign and regionally responsible Iran, how can the West ensure that Tehran's "velvet revolution" clock ticks faster than its nuclear clock? While the West is continuing to engage the regime to solve the nuclear standoff, it should also talk over the ayatollahs' heads and address the population.

So far, however, this has not been the case. For European governments the promotion of human rights inside Iran was never an attractive proposition. Europe feared antagonising China and Russia, its partners in the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). Loathing the regime-change rhetoric of the Bush administration, the EU believed that Tehran could be persuaded to be nice if only it could be assured that the West would not seek to subvert it. The Americans now appear to agree.

Under the Obama administration, support for Iran's opposition has been eroding steadily in Washington too. Europeans insist their agenda is not regime-change but behaviour change. The message to Tehran is: "As long as we are talking, we will not contemplate any other measure to achieve our goals."

This is a blow to Iran's beleaguered forces of change. Potentially, it is also a strategic blunder of tragic proportions. Western governments have chosen to offer recognition to the regime and are ready to shake its leaders' hands when they are dripping with the blood of their people.

The revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear site near Qom may help those who argue that time is short and a deal with the regime is inevitable, lest Iran crosses the nuclear finish line. But the fact remains that the turmoil after the June elections provided an unprecedented opportunity to corner a regime that had clearly lost control of the situation, if only briefly.

Yet it is not too late to seize it. As Europe shows impatience with Washington's new resolve to engage a regime whose word is worth very little, it should acknowledge that the best chance to solve the nuclear impasse is support for a new and more benevolent regime in Tehran.

As Europe accompanies President Obama, fresh from winning the Nobel Prize for Peace, through the perilous journey of disillusionment that its experience of dialogue with Iran inevitably brings, the EU should consider letting the Iranian people know that the free world has not abandoned them. During the Bush years, Europe never offered much hope of a high noon with Iran, while America seemed always itching to step into its cowboy boots and pull out its gun. But now, it seems, the roles are at least temporarily reversed, with some Europeans itching for an escalation and criticising America for being naïve.

Much damage can be done to Iran's leaders just when their internal legitimacy is being so directly challenged — by isolation, public humiliation, embarrassment and inconvenience. Symbolic gestures will heighten the regime's sense of psychological vulnerability while emboldening its opponents. Ministers can be declared *persona non grata*. Regime stalwarts who travel to Europe for skiing holidays can be turned back. Their properties can be seized and assets frozen. And while European governments do not wish to give credence to the regime's conspiracy theories about Western plots to overthrow it, they should remember how quickly the Shah lost control in 1979. Iranians, judging by what we've seen in recent weeks, may be ready to take a risk.

They just need to be helped in the most basic ways — food for their families, tools to circumvent the regime's censorship and disruption of the internet, and ways to communicate among themselves safely. But most of all, they desperately need to know that the free world has neither forgotten nor forsaken them.

Let them know in every way we can that we are on their side. When engagement fails, we'll discover that the Iranian people remain our best ally and our only hope to emerge from this crisis.