The Effects and Consequences of U.S. Policy on ‘Democratising’ Iran

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Introduction

With the outburst of political dissatisfaction in Iran, as a reaction to the 2009 presidential election outcome, it has once again become clear that the issue of democratisation finds itself at the core of contemporary affairs in politics, political science and, most importantly, the daily lives of many people around the world. Transformation of the political situation of Iran seemed quite likely during the first weeks following the elections. However, the political situation of Iran, in the short run, can best be described as a ‘stalemate’ in the advantage of the regime. This contribution will analyze how the government of the United States of America operates in order to alter that situation. As a consequence of a troublesome legacy between both countries – one can think of the 1953 coup initiated by the CIA and the hostage crisis during the 1979 revolution – hostility between both states has become something that is taken for granted. Although the nuclear issue currently outweighs the (interrelated) question of democratization, U.S. preferences regarding Iran’s political character and attitude are widely known and speculations about U.S. mingling in Iran’s contemporary political events are abundant. In order to move beyond such speculations, this contribution aims at answering the questions what the actual content of U.S. policy on this issue is and what the effects and consequences of that policy are. Before moving over to those questions, the first section of this paper discusses the (un)desirability of a (more) democratic Iran by offering several different perspectives displayed in American political discussions. Secondly, the particular form of Iranian democracy desired by the U.S. will be outlined. The third section places the issue of Iranian democratization in the perspective of broader U.S. democracy promotion policy in the Middle East, while existing obstacles in the way of U.S. democratisation efforts in Iran will be dealt with in part four. The main body of this paper provides an outline of U.S. policy – overt and covert – on democratising Iran and argues that by providing the Iranian regime incentives to intensify its repressive character the policy, both under Bush and Obama, hindered Iranian democratization rather than stimulating it. Unless the Obama administration proves willing to drastically alter its policy on Iran, in order to bring it in line with its long term geopolitical goals, both Iranian democratization and U.S. – Iranian relations will be unnecessarily hindered for the time to come.

1 The author would like to thank Gerd Junne, Paul Aarts and Benjamin MacQueen for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
1. The (un)desirability of a democratic Iran

The specific desirability of democratisation of a specific state or region depends on the involved actors, their visions on the exact meanings of democracy and democratisation and, more specific, their assumptions and expectations regarding the effects of installing a democracy in a specific place and time. This implies that it is impossible to give an all-encompassing answer to the question of why democratisation is desirable, since it is context dependent. This section will look into the specific question why a (more) democratic Iran is desired, and undesired, by (particular factions of) the U.S. government and on what kind of assumptions that (un)desirability is based. It is important to note that these assumptions and motivations are mostly based on the current hegemonic definitions of democracy and democratisation and, therefore, must not be regarded as ‘the truth’ or moral givens. Assumptions and motivations are just that: assumptions and motivations. In fact, besides being desired, democracy and democratisation may be criticized or even contested by particular actors, non-democratic rulers in the first place.

U.S. motivations for a democratic Iran are not as straightforward as they seem from the outside. Different combinations of ideas and interests ensure different visions on this issue. One motivation in favor of supporting democracy/democratisation is the belief that democracy is a value in itself. Formulated differently, some believe that democratisation is desirable (anywhere) because democracy itself has an intrinsic value. Besides being supported because of this intrinsic value, democratisation is regarded by many as the most suitable method to implement instrumental values and additional benefits that come along with democracy. In this regard, ‘stability’, and to a lesser extent ‘prosperity’, are the magic words. Nationally, democratisation is believed to reduce ethnic, religious and political conflict and instability by means of inclusive representative political institutions. Regionally, a democratic Iran is assumed to be more transparent and less likely to pursue destabilization policies in neighboring states, or support terrorist organizations (Diamond 2009: 65-76; Milani et al. 2006: 259). More important is the assumption that democratisation eventually leads to regional and international peace and, subsequently, stability. Thus, Iranian democratisation is desired by the U.S. for the same reasons it desires democratisation of Iraq.

Democracy, democratisation, non-democratic rule and authoritarianism are all concepts loaded with context-dependent connotations. The result is that democracy, not only as theoretical concept but also as existing political system, (within borders) seems to be what actors make of it. Nevertheless, from time to time hegemonic definitions are formed by ideas and interests of the most dominant global powers. Policies and actions are often based on those definitions.

One might claim that the U.S. government desires destabilization of the Iranian regime rather than democratisation. Therefore, it is important to clarify the difference between both concepts. In the best-case scenario for the U.S., Iranian regime change will be complemented by a democratic succession. However, considering the difficulties surrounding efforts to support and reach democratisation, it can hardly be denied that the U.S. would settle for a pro-American non-democratic Iranian regime when such a chance would present itself. In fact, it could be claimed that the U.S. actually aims at the destabilization of the regime in order to replace it, rather than at democratisation per se. When, after destabilizing the regime until it collapses, democratisation would turn out to be an easy target, the administration would not hesitate to seize that opportunity. When, on the other hand, that would turn out to be quite risky, the U.S. would possibly (and probably) settle for ‘just’ the pro-American non-democratic alternative.

For more about the U.S. perspective on Iran’s involvement in ‘terrorism’ see Katzman (2003), US Department of State (2009) and Addis et al. (2010). Indeed, the term ‘terrorist organization’, or ‘terrorism’ for that matter, is highly normative and a lively (and probably eternal) discussion exists on what exactly fits the (different) definitions.

Following the ‘democratic peace theory’ (based on Kant’s perpetual peace philosophy), the argument goes that democratic states tend not to fight other democratic states; democracy, therefore, ‘is seen as a major source of peace’ (Baylis et al. 2008: 233).
and Afghanistan, and a (more) democratic Middle East (or at least particular parts of it) in general. Democratisation, the argument goes, will bring stability and, thereby, safeguard U.S. interests. It will increase its national security by decreasing anti-Americanism and the will to conduct ('terrorist') attacks on U.S. soil. Besides stability, it is believed that democracy generates more welfare compared to their non-democratic counterparts. Democratisation of Iran will, as many seem to assume, open the gates towards liberal trade and, thus, new opportunities for the U.S. brought by the opening of new (liberal) economic markets.

Access to Iranian oil and gas resources is another interest that comes within hand reach when Iran changes politically into a democracy (or at least a pro-American entity). Apart from implementing capitalistic (free-market) systems in most cases, democracies are believed to promote education and science which, together with the rule of law, should generate innovation and economic growth (Dahl 1998: 58-59). Furthermore, a solution for the nuclear issue is believed to be reached more easily in such a scenario. Finally, democratisation of a country located in a region dominated by non-democratic rule is assumed to generate spill-over effects. In other words, a ‘demonstration’ effect supposedly leads to the democratisation of states in proximity, or linked by history, to nations already democratized or democratising (Huntington 1991; Starr 1991, 1995; Starr & Lindborg 2003). Although all the above mentioned assumptions are criticized, recent (foreign) policies (on Iraq and Afghanistan) are influenced by them (Enterline & Greig 2005) and these notions seem resilient enough to influence future foreign policy decisions, among others, aimed at Iran as well.

Both notions, democracy as non-instrumental and as instrumental value, can, besides being approached isolated from each other, be combined into a different perspective. Some, and perhaps most people, believe that support for Iranian democratisation is worth the trouble exactly because normatively it is the right thing to do and because it suits U.S. interests. However, perspectives in which support for Iranian democratisation is regarded senseless and undesirable exist as well. Structural Realists regard the democratic peace theory, and attempts to implement democracy globally, as irrelevant and at times even dangerous policy goals. They claim that it is not in the interest of the U.S. to democratise Iran and attempts to reach that goal might eventually lead to the relative decline of American power (Schweller 2000: 41). Some see domestic political systems of other states as irrelevant regarding U.S. attempts to reach its foreign policy goals; dealing with democracies or not, the U.S. should strive for fulfillment of its own interests (whatever those are) anyway. Others claim that anything the US does in order to support

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6 Although it is far from certain that a more democratic Iran would abandon its search for nuclear power (or weapons for that matter), a pro-American Iran with access to nuclear technology is regarded more desirable than an anti-American power with such options. The U.S., thus, is more interested in maintaining its hegemony, or at least domination, rather than in the promotion of a democratic system per se (Schweller 2000: 61).
Iranian reformists is bad for its legitimacy and might even facilitate the flourishing of anti-Western sentiments and authoritarianism (see Youngs 2010: 29). Thus, general statements regarding Iran’s political situation are tolerable; involvement in any further actions are not. Following this argument, space for the U.S. to implement democratisation measures in Iran does not exist. A (more) democratic Iran might even pose a far greater challenge to the U.S., compared to the current regime, because ‘a more effective and intelligent government would be able to mobilize Iran’s considerable latent power potential much more effectively than the clerical regime has’ (Walt 2009). Finally, democratisation of Iran is unwanted by those, mostly neo-cons, who fare well by the current situation. A ‘negative’ and ‘hawkish’ policy sells better under the threat of an external and ‘irrational’ threat. Hardliners on both sides need each other in order to make sure that their interests - financial, political, or both - are given a ‘priority’ status.

2. Iranian Democratisation: Why Now and What Particular Form?

Desiring for a more democratic and pro-American Iran is not something uncommon for U.S. administrations but, instead, has existed ever since the pro-American Shah was toppled in 1979. The actual status of a policy-issue at a certain moment in time, however, depends on the specific priorities of particular administrations. Although Iranian democratisation, or even regime change, has never been the primary objective of an administration, including the current one, it has reached a (relatively) high position on the current administration’s ‘to do list’. The answer to the question ‘why now?’ is a complex one and relates to the current configuration of multi-level global politics. The (potential) position and influence of the United States in the Middle East is obviously the most important factor regarding this issue. Both wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed the balance of power of the region and gave a more prominent position to Iran and, therefore, it becomes natural to shift focus to Iran. Although the U.S. and Iran cooperated on some aspects of both conflicts, the relations between both countries deteriorated after the ‘axis of evil’ speech that was delivered by former president Bush. The speech crippled the reformists’ foreign policy agenda and enabled the hardliners to use the available space in order to break democratic aspirations in the face of an outside threat. Encircled by U.S. military bases and influence Iran manages to oppose U.S. dominance and picture itself as a regional actor to be reckoned with. Together

Both wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed the balance of power of the region and gave a more prominent position to Iran.

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7 Mentioned by Steven Heydemann in an interview with the author.
8 This point was mentioned by Paul Aarts (lecturer International Relations at the University of Amsterdam) and Loes Bijnen (former human rights expert for the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs) during an interview with the author.
9 One can think of the existence and maintenance of particular organizations that are dependent on mutual hostility: the military, security-oriented organizations, consultants, political parties and politicians are some examples.
with the nuclear issue, which is a pressing political issue for Obama, earlier mentioned U.S. interests, and the latest Iranian elections, Iranian democratisation has become an issue that receives a lot of attention. At the same time, the current configuration of multi-level political factors brings a perceived opportunity to resolve the issue in the near future. In this regard, the earlier mentioned notions of democracy as a non-instrumental value and democracy as an instrumental value mutually strengthen each other so that a strong claim for the support of Iranian democratisation can be made.\(^\text{10}\)

The particular form of Iranian democracy desired by the current administration is less clear. Although many civil servants, working at different positions within the government, probably have thought about this issue, introducing a solid and unambiguous vision proves to be quite a difficult undertaking. Therefore, a comprehensive common strategy does not exist at this moment and should not be expected very soon. To some extent, the administration seems to be aware of the fact that democratisation will only work when the Iranian society is given the opportunity to decide the concrete content of democracy for themselves\(^\text{11}\), since that is a core-element of democracy. On the other hand, however, as the example of Palestinian elections has shown, it should not turn into a democratic outcome that opposes U.S. interests and ideas radically. After all, what would be in it for the U.S. then? Current developments regarding the nuclear issue and U.S. – Iranian diplomacy point in the direction of increasing hostility and brinkmanship rather than mutual understanding and genuine negotiation.

3. Broader U.S. Policy on Democratizing the Middle East

U.S. policy on democratizing Iran cannot be analyzed totally decoupled of broader U.S. policy on this issue in the Middle East. Additionally, in order to understand current policy, one has to be aware of the policies implemented by former administrations. Although support for democratisation is a part of U.S. foreign policy since Wilson’s presidency after World War 1, it revived as one of the ‘essentials’ under the presidency of Clinton after the Cold War (see Cox 2000: 218-239). After Clinton, under the rule of George W. Bush, things seemed to change. However, although an ambitious domestic agenda was labeled as top priority, following the September 11\(^\text{th}\) terrorist attacks in 2001, foreign policy reemerged as the spearhead of U.S. interests with democracy promotion at the forefront (Milbank 2004; Craner 2006: 3; Menotti 2006: 11; Seaman 2010: 9). Some politicians and scholars even showed their view ‘that U.S. power is the sole pillar upholding a liberal world order that is conducive to the principles [the United States] believes in’ (Monten 2005: 112). With the ‘Freedom Agenda’, consisting of (bilateral) assistance programs run via ‘The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and ‘The National Endowment for Democracy’ (NED) and programs like the ‘Middle East Partnership Initiative’ (MEPI)\(^\text{12}\), ‘The

\(^{10}\) This point was mentioned by Steven Heydemann in an interview with the author.

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\(^{12}\) MEPI was initiated in 2002 and aims at political and economical reform of the MENA region. See http://mepi.state.gov/ for more information.
The statement of former president George W. Bush, in which he said that ‘60 years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us [the U.S./the West] safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty’, points into the direction that the primary goal of the ‘Freedom Agenda’ was regional stability of the Middle East. However, when elections in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories in 2005 and 2006 brought success to parties with (as) radical (perceived) and anti-American views (Wittes & Yerkes 2006: ix), the U.S. seems to have concluded that genuine political reform will not necessarily bring a (more) stable Middle East. Looking back, one might state that the U.S. under Bush did not really undertake a (genuine) democracy promotion effort at all and despite the fact that programs like MEPI still exist, and in fact have become a centerpiece for the Obama administration to support democracy in the region (McInerney 2010: 3), the mentioned elections, together with disappointing developments in Iraq and especially Afghanistan, have called America’s commitment to support democratisation of the Middle East into question.

Although to some extent the government seems to take its role as democracy supporter in the region seriously, and Obama’s ‘behind the scene approach’ is regarded more successful than Bush’s ‘in your face policy’ (Slavin 2010), it must be noted that geopolitical interests trump efforts to support democratisation. Some even argue that democracy promotion under the Obama administration is not a major regional priority or is even missing as a policy (ibid; Ottaway 2009: 1). As McInerney notes, ‘U.S. assistance to the region remains dominated by aid for regional militaries [and] leaving aside Iraq, the FY11 budget requests $5.1 billion for military assistance to the Middle East but only $1.3 billion for non-military assistance and initiatives, of which $225.9 million is designated to support democracy and governance’ (ibid). When these figures are compared to the $159.3 billion requested for Department of Defense expenditures in Iraq and Afghanistan, things become really clear: ideas of democratisation of the BMENA region do not match America’s (short term) regional geopolitical interests and the dominant position of the latter compels the U.S. to work with non-democratic allies (Ottaway & Carothers 2004). Considering such findings, the words of Obama, mentioned in his inaugural speech, that ‘he would reject as false “the choice between our safety and our ideals”’ (Roth 2010: 10), in a way become blank rounds.

In order to really deliver on this issue, the Obama administration first of all needs to acknowledge the existence of different priorities and interests and, ideally, needs to get

13 BMENA was initiated in 2004 and ‘represents genuine co-operation between the G8 and European nations and the governments, business and civil society of the region, in order to strengthen freedom, democracy and prosperity for all’ (U.S. Department of State). See http://bmena.state.gov/ for more information.

14 NERD was initiated in 2009 ‘as a new program to support democracy and human rights in the region, particularly in Iran. It includes a strong focus on support for media, technology, and Internet freedom’ (McInerney 2010: 15). This issue will be covered later in this chapter.

15 Indeed, such figures do not tell the whole story and, in order to analyze democracy promotion programs one should look at how funds are spent as well (McInerney 2010: 3).

16 For critical views on U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East and alternative views see Dalacoura (2005), Frum (2008), Bellin (2008), Ottaway (2009), Mathews et al. (2009), Brown & Hawthorne (2010) and Brumberg (2010).
sorted out on the (possible) opposing priorities. Secondly, current policy – both on geopolitics and democratisation – needs to reform drastically in order to become effective.

4. Obstacles in the Way of U.S. Democratisation Efforts in Iran

Compared to the broader situation of the Middle East, the U.S. faces different problems in trying to democratize Iran. First of all, there are those who fear negative side-effects of U.S. efforts to democratize Iran, those who just do not consider it to be a concern for the U.S. to worry about, and those who rather see a survival of non-democratic rule in Iran. Nevertheless, most actors active in or around the current administration seem to agree that Iranian democratisation is, in sharp contrast to the broader Middle East, a more or less unambiguous U.S. interest. Relations between Iran and the U.S. have been hostile since the 1979 revolution and, therefore, the U.S. does not need to tolerate non-democratic rule in order to preserve its ties with the regime. Besides that, the U.S. does not have to fear a potential Islamist alternative since it is believed that things will not get any worse than the current situation. To put it differently, it is assumed that, no matter what, any alternative is better for the U.S., since any alternative will be a more republican one. Add to that the belief that most Iranians, ignoring the anti-American rhetoric of the regime, have a positive image of the U.S. and the democratisation of Iran becomes an obvious foreign policy goal. In other words, the notions of democracy as a non-instrumental and democracy as an instrumental value complement each other in the case of Iran.

That does not mean that no obstacles exist to embrace a full-blown policy aimed at Iranian democratisation. Besides the question whether that was/is really a primary objective of the former and the current administration, three other issues have to be considered at this point. The first is the complex character of the Iranian nuclear issue. Although it is widely believed that a more democratic Iran will bring a solution for the nuclear problem and the Obama administration rather negotiates with a democratic Iranian government, there seems to be some awareness that, at this moment in time, the current Iranian regime is the one to deal with on this issue. Although after the 2009 elections, and because of the reluctance of the regime to cooperate on the nuclear issue along U.S. dictated rules, the U.S. keeps pressuring the regime, Obama knows that the current power holders are the ones who take decisions on the nuclear program. The second obstacle is the deteriorated credibility of the U.S. as a supporter for democratisation and of democracy promotion in general. As mentioned earlier, the legacy of the Bush administration has damaged the reputation of the U.S. as a reliable defender of democratic values. Potentially sincere U.S.

17 Mentioned by Steven Heydemann in an interview with the author.

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intentions are easily neutralized by the Iranian regime; all it has to do is refer to events in Iraq, Afghanistan or even the U.S. itself. The third and last obstacle is the legacy of U.S. interference in Iranian political affairs and the related hostility and fierce rhetoric of anti-Americanism displayed by the Iranian regime. Thus, where on the one hand, compared to the more friendly Arab regimes, the hostility between both is an advantage for U.S. democratisation efforts in Iran, on the other hand it is a disadvantage since democracy promotion is difficult to canalize in a hostile environment. Indeed, that is the reason why U.S. policy on the democratisation of Iran is divided into covert and overt actions. The next sections will provide an outline of both policy-branches.

5. U.S. Policy: The Covert Component

The issue of U.S. covert operations regarding the destabilization/democratisation of the Iranian regime is, for good reasons, considered to be a sensitive issue. Obviously, no public reports giving an outline of such programs exist. That, however, is no valid reason to ignore the issue completely. U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup, for example, proves that the U.S. is willing to use covert measures in order to influence the Iranian political landscape. The following section will explore recent alleged U.S. covert attempts to stimulate the destabilization/democratisation of the Iranian regime. It is important to keep in mind that this section is based on contributions of authors who base their work on well-informed sources but, although their writings are widely valued, have no hard evidence for what they claim. Although such claims might be regarded as (political) science-unworthy, they serve an obvious purpose. True, they cannot be proved; on the other hand, it would be naïve to consider them as insignificant. Covert operations are part and parcel of relations between states within the international system. The measures that are about to be mentioned here might, in reality, differ in form and dimension; however, it is not advisable to neglect these existing factors of U.S. policy aimed at Iran altogether.

Under the Bush administration, Congress allegedly agreed to a request the president ‘to fund a major escalation of covert operations against Iran, according to current and former military intelligence, and congressional sources’ (Hersh 2008: 1). The operations, described in a presidential finding, are to be paid by a 400 million dollar (!) funding and are focused on ‘trying to undermine the government to regime change’ and ‘undermining Iran’s nuclear ambitions’ (ibid: 2). Activities, besides the (again alleged) already recurrent executed cross border commando raids into Iran from southern Iraq, mainly involve support for ethnic separatist groups like the Ahwazi Arab, Baluchi and other dissident organizations (ibid; Harrison 2007). Examples of anti-Iranian regime groups who are allegedly supported by the U.S. are: (1) Jundallah (or the Iranian People’s Resistance Movement) which, according to their own description, are fighting for the rights of Sunnis living in Iran; (2) Mujahideen-e-Khalq (known in the West as M.E.K.), which has been on the U.S. Department of State list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations for over a decade, and (3) Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan

18 Republican Bob Filner recently held an event to introduce a resolution calling for the Obama administration to remove the M.E.K. from the list. Republicans Lacy Clay, Dana Rohrabacher and Ted Poe spoke in favor of the resolution as well. The resolution, entitled the “Pro-Democracy Movement in Iran resolution,” equates the MK with the Green Movement, however leaders in the Green Movement have spoken out against the group, which has little support in Iran because it fought alongside Iraq’s military during the Iran-Iraq war and has carried out numerous terrorist attacks against Iranian
(PJAK), a Kurdish separatist movement which operates mainly from bases located in northern (Kurdish) parts of Iraq (ibid: 7).\textsuperscript{19} Several armed attacks on Iranian security forces by \textit{Jundallah}\textsuperscript{20}, bombings carried out in the oil-rich south-west regions by separatist Arab movements, and more recent bombings attributed to the radical monarchist group (called the Monarchist Association), are, although impossible to prove, being linked to the $400 million program.\textsuperscript{21} Besides supporting separatists, a report by Selig Harrison in \textit{Le Monde Diplomatique} revealed that millions of U.S. dollars are covertly administered to NGO human rights activists in Iran (Harrison 2007). These revelations are confirmed by the former U.S. Undersecretary of State, Nicholas Burns (Fotopoulos 2009).

An important question is what the status of the program is under the presidency of Obama. Although Obama has pretended to refrain from meddling in Iran’s internal affairs and repeatedly pleaded for ‘tough and principled diplomacy’, the possibility that the program (if existent) has continued under his rule, although possibly in a different dimension, is real. In May 2010 ‘The New York Times’ made notice of an order of General Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in the Middle East, in which he ordered ‘a broad expansion of clandestine military activity in an effort to disrupt militant groups or encounter threats in [among other states] Iran’ (Mazzeti 2010). The order approves the establishment of ties with local forces and ‘reconnaissance that could pave the way for possible military strikes in Iran if tensions over its nuclear ambitions escalate’ as well (ibid). According to sources the main advantage of the order is that, ‘unlike covert actions undertaken by the C.I.A., such clandestine activity [by military special forces] does not require the president’s approval or regular reports to Congress, although Pentagon officials have said that any significant ventures are cleared through the National Security Council’ (ibid). Additionally, Eric Margolis pointed out that Congress recently voted for a funding of $120 million destined for anti-regime broadcasting into Iran and $60-75 million in order to support violent underground movements (Margolis 2009). All in all, it seems that, behind Obama’s public rhetoric of diplomacy, the current administration is also engaged in a covert attempt to destabilize the Iranian regime and replace it with a (more) pro-American and (if possible) more democratic one.

6. U.S. Policy: The Overt Component

The term ‘overt’ has to be taken with a grain of salt here, since, in contrast to the nuclear issue, no obvious overt and coherent policy seems to exist on supporting the democratisation of Iran. Part of the more general policy on Iran was a badly executed and probably not so sincere ‘engagement policy’ launched at the beginning of Obama’s first term

civilians’ (Elliot 2010). This is actually not the first attempt to remove the M.E.K. from the list. Daniel Pipes, Patrick Clawson and Max Boot, for example, uttered this idea earlier as well (see Postel 2007). In January 2011 another event was organized by Executive Action, LLC – which describes itself as “a McKinsey & Company with muscle, a private CIA and Defense Department available to address your most intractable problems and difficult challenges” (Leverett & Leverett 2011) – in order to gain support for delisting the M.E.K. as part of a U.S.-led campaign for Iranian regime change (ibid). For a video of this meeting see http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/297619-1&showFullAbstract=1

\textsuperscript{19} For more on this program see Hersh (2008).

\textsuperscript{20} An example is the deadly blast in \textit{Sarbaz} (\textit{Sistan-Baluchestan}) on October 18th 2009, killing at least 29 among whom Revolutionary Guards. \textit{Jundallah}, allegedly backed by the U.S. and Great Britain, was blamed for the attack.

\textsuperscript{21} This point was brought up by an anonymous Iranian researcher in an email conversation with the author.
in 2008. As mentioned in one of the Reports for Congress, Obama took some steps to engage Iran before the 2009 Iranian elections: he sent a message to the Iranian people on the occasion of Nowruz on March 21st 2009, he (reportedly) ‘sent a letter to Iran’s leadership expressing the Administration’s philosophy in favor of engagement of Iran’, he mentioned the role of the U.S. in the overthrow of Mossadeq in 1953 and he said that Iran has the right to peaceful nuclear power (if it complies with the responsibilities under the NPT) in his 2009 Cairo speech to the Muslim world, he announced that the U.S. would attend all future P5+1 meetings with Iran from April 8th 2009 onwards, and restrictions on U.S. diplomats to meet Iranian counterparts at international meetings were loosened (Katzman 2010: 44). However, after the 2009 election, and because the U.S. perceives Iran as unwilling to deliver on the nuclear issue, the policy of engagement has subsided. Although Obama acknowledges that his administration has to negotiate on the nuclear issue with the regime that is currently in place, after the 2009 Iranian elections significant confusion arose within the U.S. government. The option to preserve the possibility of a nuclear deal while at the same time supporting the Green Movement (rhetorically) suddenly vanished (ibid: 45). Uncertainties over (1) how stable the Iranian regime is; (2) how likely a split in the clerical elite is (3) how (if ever) to support the Green Movement and (4) what will happen if a deal on the nuclear issue is negotiated and the regime collapses afterwards\(^{22}\), all play a part in current U.S. policy calculations. Although Obama ‘continues to assert that the U.S. is open to dialogue with Iran if it adopts a new position on its nuclear program’ (ibid) the administrations’ stand has become more critical after the regime’s repressive reaction to the protests and the option of (more or less openly) supporting Iranian regime change seems (back) on Obama’s table. By stating openly that ‘we [the U.S.] will continue to speak out in defense of basic human liberties and in support of those around the world who seek to exercise their universal rights’ (U.S. Department of State 2010a), Obama’s administration has obviously taken a more active, although still diplomatically ‘correct’, stance towards criticizing the regime. As mentioned by Steven Heydemann in an interview with the author.

\(^{22}\)
6.1 Funding

U.S. policy on the desired democratisation of Iran can best be analyzed by investigating the funds available for such initiatives. Funds, however, do not tell the whole story and, in order to get a more comprehensive image of the situation, one should analyze how the funds are spent as well. That is where problems arise and where ‘overt’, to some extent, becomes ‘covert’. Information regarding who receives funding and what it is used for should, according to the State Department, remain classified in order to protect those who receive it (Ong 2008). As Carah Ong mentions, ‘There is no reporting requirement to Congress [and] absolutely no accountability at all with this money’ (Ong in Leopold 2008). Therefore, this analysis is limited in the sense that it only looks at funding, and not at how the money is being spent exactly. Nevertheless, funding tells some parts of the story and gives a rather good image of priorities of the U.S. government regarding the issue. In order to get reliable information on funding, numbers are being double checked using multiple sources.²³

Between 2004 and 2009 funds for democracy promotion, with the exception of 2007, increased sharply. In 2004 $1.5 million was assigned to the foreign operations appropriation for humanitarian, educational and non-governmental organizations and individuals in Iran ‘to support the advancement of democracy and human rights in Iran’ (Katzman 2010: 52). One million dollar was given, by the State Department Bureau of Democracy and Labor (DRL), to a unit of Yale University and $500,000 to National Endowment for Democracy. In 2005 $3 million from the foreign aid appropriation was appointed for democracy promotion with political party development, media, labor rights, civil society promotion, and human rights as priority areas (ibid). In 2006 11.15 million dollar was made available for democracy promotion: $4.15 million went to DRL and $7 million was given to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. $66.1 million of the requested 75 million dollar was granted to Iran democracy promotion programs from the FY2006 supplemental budget. Democracy promotion took a controversial $20 million of that amount. Controversial, since MEPI, the receiver of the funding, besides labeling its spending as ‘democracy programs in Iran’ has never provided more information on what that truly means (Blout 2008). $5 million was invested in public diplomacy aimed at the Iranian population, and the same amount of money was used for cultural exchanges. The remaining 36.1 million went to Voice of America (VoA) and Radio Farda broadcasting²⁴ through the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) (ibid). No funds for Democracy Promotion especially aimed at Iran were requested in 2007. $6.55 million was provided for Iran and Syria together. That amount was administered through DRL and $3.04 million was used for activities on Iran (Katzman 2010: 52). For the year 2008 it is slightly problematic to find out which initiatives were funded. It is known that, after the appropriations committees in both chambers of Congress rejected the FY08 budget request at first (Blout 2008), $60 million (of $75 million requested) was granted under the Consolidated Appropriation Act 2008. $21.6 of that sixty million dollar came from Economic Support Funds (ESF) for pro democracy programs in Iran, ‘including non-violent efforts to


²⁴ Funding for broadcasting services was also mentioned by Steven Heydemann, Paul Aarts and an anonymous Iranian researcher in an interview with the author.
oppose Iran’s meddling in other countries’ (Katzman 2010: 52), and was to be administered by the Bureau for Near East Affairs (NEA) (no money was appropriated to MEPI) (Blout 2008; McInerney 2009: 27; Katzman 2010: 52). Another $7.9 million came from a ‘Democracy Fund’ for use by the DRL. According to Blout, DRL was also ‘charged with administering a $15 million grant program for anti-censorship or internet freedom in the Middle East and China’ (Iran, Syria and China). That 15 million, however, was not part of the granted $60 million for the ‘Iran Democracy Program’. Doubts arise over the remaining $30.5 million (according to some calculations $30.2 million) of the appropriation unaccounted for. According to McInerney, that amount of money came from other unspecified accounts, ‘to be determined by the Director of Foreign Assistance [and] much of these funds were taken from the budget of the BBG for Persian language broadcasting’ (McInerney 2010: 27). What happened with the money remains an unanswered question until now. According to Katzman ‘the Appropriation also fully funded additional $33.6 million requested for Iran broadcasting: $20 million for VoA Persian service; and $8.1 million for Radio Farda; and $5.5 million for exchanges with Iran’ (Katzman 2010: 52). President Bush requested $65 million in ESF ‘to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for a democratic and open society by promoting civil society, civic participation, media reform, and freedom of information’ (U.S. State Department in Katzman 2010: 52). In contrast to previous years, the Appropriations Act 2009 contained no specific allocation under the ESF heading for Iran, neither an earmark for democracy funding in Iran (McInerney 2009: 27). However, unspecified ESF funds, distributable at the discretion of the administration, were partly available for the purpose.

Under Obama the policy in which any funding for Iran is not specifically allocated or earmarked seems to be the new standard. Besides the unspecified ESF funds administered in the first place to president Bush, the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program was established which received $25 million for democracy promotion in the region, including Iran (ibid: Katzman 2010: 52). This program was not included in the requests of President Bush and, according to McInerney, ‘it seems as though it was developed by the appropriations committee staff in conjunction with the incoming Obama administration during its first few weeks in office’ (McInerney 2009: 14). The 25 million dollar was divided into $14.9 million for the support of Iranian civil society and the rest is being used for other democracy promotion programs (ibid; Katzman 2010: 52). Again, specific information on how the funds are spent is not provided by any of the appropriations committee members, their staff or the administration. All that is clear is that the program is seen as replacement of the funding designated for Iran as ESF under Bush (ibid). In other words, it is recognition by the new administration of the need to support reform in Iran, while it is a reaction to criticism of the Bush approach. The program focuses strongly on support for media, technology and internet freedom while funds, although primarily aimed at Iran, are not required to be spent in any specific country.  

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25 There is movement in congress, however, to allocate the money specifically for Iran (Abdo 2010).
all, the program seemingly gives the current administration more flexibility regarding the issue (McInerney 2010: 15). In 2010 funding for Iranian democristisation decreased when compared to previous years. Obama requested and received $40 million in 2010 for NERD initiatives of which $25 million was designated for civil society support, including support for access to information. $5 million is available for the remaining three ‘Governing Justly and Democratically’ (GJD) program areas. Special attention for internet access translates into a specific earmark of $10 million under the NERD funds for ‘internet access and freedom’ (ibid). The request for FY11 is equal to that of FY10: $40 million in total, of which (again) $25 million for civil society support. Obama’s request for the NED in 2011 is $105 million of which a part is likely to be used for civil society building/training and providing opportunities for building networks among political activists in, among other countries, Iran (ibid).

6.2 Regional Diplomatic Presence

Besides funding, several other initiatives are being considered. The first is the enhancement of Iran-focused regional diplomatic pressure. Under the presidency of George W. Bush, the presence of Persian-speaking U.S. diplomats in diplomatic missions around Iran were being increased. According to Stockman, ‘the Iran unit at the U.S. consulate in Dubai has been enlarged significantly into a ‘regional presence’ office, and ‘Iran-watcher’ positions have been added to U.S. diplomatic facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan; Istanbul, Turkey; Frankfurt, Germany; London [the United Kingdom]; and Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, all of which have large expatriate Iranian populations and/or proximity to Iran’ (Stockman 2006; Katzman 2010: 52). Some even go as far as to claim that the U.S. should place U.S. personnel at the Foreign Interests Section in Tehran. Although such staff-members would mostly help facilitate U.S.-Iran people-to-people contacts and process Iranian visas, some observers argue that State Department officials see such a move as a chance to broaden U.S. contacts with the Green Movement and estimate its strength (ibid). Yet, no decision has been made on this issue by the Obama administration at the time of writing.

6.3 Bills and Resolutions From the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives

Now and then bills and/or resolutions, regarding issues concerning support for Iranian democratisation, are being introduced by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The ‘Iran Democracy Act’ of 2003 (S. 1082, 108th Congress), for example, calls for the provision of support for democracy in Iran and ‘declares that it is the policy of the United States to support full democracy in Iran’. The ‘Iran Freedom and Democracy Support Act’ of 2003 (H.R. 2466, 108th Congress) calls for encouragement of ‘democratic reform in Iran and to strengthen United States policy toward the current government of Iran’. The ‘Iran Freedom and Support Act’ of 2004 (S. 2681, 108th Congress) calls for establishment of ‘a program to

26 The Foreign Interests Section is part of the Embassy of Switzerland and ‘acts as protecting power for the interest of the USA in the Islamic Republic of Iran’ (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs). For more information see http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/reps/asia/virn/fotsh.html
support a transition to democracy in Iran’. Resolution H.Res. 33 (2009, 111th Congress) expresses ‘the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Iran’s lack of protection for internationally recognized human rights creates poor conditions for religious freedom in the Islamic Republic of Iran’. Resolution H.Res. 888 (2009, 111th Congress) expresses ‘the continued support and call for a renewed focus on the ‘Green Movement’ within Iran, which embraces the yearning of the Iranian people in seeking freedom, human rights, and fundamental elements of democracy’. The ‘Stand with the Iranian People Act’ of 2009 (H.R. 4303, 111th Congress) calls for ‘prohibiting Federal procurement contracts with persons that provide censorship or surveillance technology to the Government of Iran’. And, finally, the ‘Iran Democratic Transition Act of 2010’ (S. 3008, 111th Congress) calls for the establishment of ‘a program to support a transition to a freely elected, open democracy in Iran’. All are examples of proposed legislation being in consideration at the moment and, more or less, calling for more (pressing) support for Iranian democratisation.

7. Effects and Consequences of the Policy

Giving an explanation in the form of a reasonable and plausible outline of the possible effects of U.S. policy on democratizing/stabilizing is one thing. Giving an overview of the effects of such policy is quite something else. Isolating concrete effects of policies is something rather difficult and becomes impossible when the precise content of such policies is kept hidden from the outside world. This section will look into possible effects and possible consequences of those effects. Although we can never be sure on this issue, by consulting different sources it becomes possible to give a reasonable explanation.

7.1 Effects of the Policy

Effects of the covert component, because of its classified character, are difficult to estimate. Nevertheless, when looking at operations and attacks conducted by the earlier mentioned separatist movements, it seems as if they have made little, if any, contribution to the democratisation process. None of these causes have become really popular, failing to attract broad public support within the Iranian society at large. In fact, an anonymous Iranian researcher stated in an email conversation that ‘since the emergence of the non-violent Green Movement, the inability of the violent forms of opposition to contribute to the democratisation process have become more evident. In fact, the democratisation process in Iran is being driven by the urban-based middle class, which is typically highly-educated, academic, or business-oriented, culturally sophisticated and highly-diversified, and most significantly very reluctant to get involved in violence. In fact, the social groups which have dedicated themselves openly to a democratic agenda have consciously adopted non-violent forms of civil action as the only effective form of democratisation in Iran. They have even adopted a strategy to expose the regime as the source of violence and hence a deterrent to

27 For the exact content and the status of all these bills and resolutions, see www.govtrack.us/
28 Note that such proposals become laws only when signed by the president and that proposals may never become actual laws.
peace and security.’ All in all, the covert component probably hindered democratisation and even destabilization since the regime has been able to use the threat of separatist movements in order to play the ‘nationalist card’ and strengthen its control, without ever being threatened severely by such movements.

Possible effects of the ‘overt’ U.S. policy aimed at democratizing Iran became clearly visible after the 2006 request made by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for $75 million to support democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. Together with the rumors of the secret $400 million program, the appropriated $66.1 million in that year together with the $60 million in 2008 seems to have backfired at the Bush administration (and later the Obama administration as well). First of all, the Iranian regime seized the opportunity to claim - although such claims are made throughout the last three decades - that the main goal of the U.S. is Iranian regime change. Furthermore, the funding for democracy (or even regime change) promotion sparked heavy critique from several experts and Iranian political activists. Shirin Ebadi claimed that ‘no truly nationalist and democratic group will accept [such funding because] Iranian reformists believe that democracy cannot be imported. It must be indigenous [and] they believe that the best Washington can do for democracy in Iran is to leave them alone’. One of the most important and often heard critiques of the funding is that it taints activists as being backed directly by the U.S. (O’Rourke 2007). As Trita Parsi, founder and president of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), stated: ‘The money has made all Iranian NGOs targets and put them at great risk. While the Iranian government has not needed a pretext to harass its own population, it would behoove Congress not to provide it with one’ (ibid). Akbar Ganji agrees with Parsi, as he wrote in The Washington Post that U.S. aid to the pro-democracy movement in Iran should be stopped as it compromises recipients in the eyes of fellow Iranians; Iranians do not want to be dependent on outsiders when it comes to their democratic movement(s) (ibid). Another factor that increases the problematic character of the funding is its secret dimension. This aspect of the funding has enabled the Iranian authorities to mark any activist, NGO or separatist movement as ‘U.S. backed’ and therefore in support of a ‘velvet revolution’ (Kalbasi 2009). In other words,

…the regime has been able to use the threat of separatist movements in order to play the ‘nationalist card’ and strengthen its control, without ever being threatened by such movements.

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29 This is a notion supported by many others; among whom scholars. See, for example, a recent article written by Takis Fotopoulos (2009), ‘Iran, The Campaign for Regime Change in its Last Phase’ and the booklet ‘The Pink Revolution in Iran and the ‘Left’ (2009). This contribution points in that direction as well.

30 After the 2009 elections Iran reacted in a similar way, accusing Obama of plotting against Iran and even of planning a civil war within Iran. After arresting a leader of Jundullah in February 2010, Iranian authorities accused him of having links with the United States. Iranian state television even broadcasted a statement of the leader in which he confessed to have been supported by America. According to the BBC it was ‘not possible to say whether the man, Abdolmalek Rigi, made the
effects of the funding have the same impact on directly-, indirectly- and non-involved actors; the Iranian regime does not differentiate between them because the funding gives an opportunity to treat them all alike. Another critique mentioned is that the decision to classify information, the recipients of the funding for example, ‘precludes any external effort to evaluate the efficacy or even calculate how much of the funding has been spent in Iran’ (Maloney 2007: 47). Two more critical notes are raised by Suzanne Maloney. The first being that most of the funding has not reached Iran but, instead, went to U.S.- or Europe-based organizations or groups. According to her, the United States lacks insight to influence Iran’s internal political dynamics (Dilanian 2009). At the same time, the funding, together with other ‘tools’ that are used to pressure the regime, may spark nationalistic responses which consolidate the regime rather than undermine it (Maloney 2007: 47).

All in all, the effects of the policy seem rather negative. However, we should be very careful when drawing such harsh conclusions; certainly when the issue at hand is as complex as it is in this particular case. It could be the case that some people see the policy as something positive or even effective. In fact, that is the case. Besides the rather weakly grounded cases in support of the policy31, strong founded pleas exist as well. One argument could be that the regime will claim U.S. interference and support/funding for reformists anyway. To put it differently, would it really make a difference if the U.S. would stop its Iran democracy program? Certainly, proof of U.S. mingling would be missing, but does coercive action require such proof? Secondly, as Iranian dissident Akbar Atri claims, Iranians have already considerably benefited from U.S. democracy funding. Especially the funds for Persian language broadcasting (VoA, Radio Farda, etc.) are effective according to him. As he wrote in the Wall Street Journal, ‘these broadcasts offer news and perspectives to the Iranian public that they would otherwise not have, including news regarding developments inside their own country. The broadcasts are popular with millions of diverse Iranians and have successfully broken the Islamic Republic’s attempts to isolate the country from external source information. The Iranian regime could not be happier to see its popular nemeses – VoA television and Radio Farda – exterminated by Iranian-Americans and others purporting to do good’ (Atri in O’Rourke 2007). Atri considers the funding, since it supports civil society and moderate voices in Iran, an important pillar for averting military conflict with Iran over its nuclear program and he ridicules the idea that the regime’s repressive character is intensified by the U.S. policy (ibid). Besides such views, many see the current policy of president Obama as a step in the right direction, compared to Bush his policy on the issue. Many have applauded the new president’s decision to cut down the funding. Although still existing, the current funds, according to many prominent Iranian, Iranian-Americans, and non-Iranians who support Iranian reformists, allow some space for the negative side-effects of the Bush policy to fade (Zubairy 2009). The new focus on internet freedom in Iran is also seen as a positive development by some. Geneive Abdo (fellow and Iran analyst at the Century Foundation), for example, thinks that ‘NERD is a very smart effort by the [Obama] administration to address very specific civil society issues without bringing on the ‘same sort

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31 Take Democrat Gary Ackerman for example, who stated that ‘it might not be a bad idea to let people know verbally, out loud, for all the world to see, including them [reformers in Iran], the kind of support, at least talk, that we appreciate what they are doing and that we are inspired by their courage’ (Robinson 2009).
of baggage’ as democracy promotion policies’ (POMED 2010). In other words, she believes that the NERD funding can be used in a very practical way (ibid).

7.2 Consequences of the Effects

All in all, the previous section provides us with a mixed drawing of the effects of U.S. efforts to democratize Iran. Does the U.S. really stimulate democratisation in Iran? Although the opposite may be difficult to prove, the outcome is, least to say, ambiguous. It becomes obvious that a distinction should be made between the policies of Bush and Obama. The policy implemented by Bush was doomed to fail from the start considering the context of the ‘war on terror’ with its conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan perceived by most as attempts of regime change by coercive means, the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay affairs which damaged severely the image of the U.S. as protector of global democracy and human rights, and the global democracy (promotion) backlash. Allowing democracy promotion to be funded by, compared to previous periods, large amounts of money gave the Iranian regime an opportunity to label every attempt to support reforms, no matter how intense, as backed by ‘the Great Satan’ and therefore neo-colonial, imperialistic and anti-Iranian (IRI). The outcome is that democracy promotion under Bush did not have the desired effects and, instead, probably worked counterproductive. As a consequence, Obama was burdened with a delicate legacy, since legacies do not vanish when new presidents are sworn into office. The question is whether Obama can turn the tide and change the policy to the extent that it will really make a difference. Although it is too early to evaluate, that does not seem to be the case when policy remains incoherently composed like it currently is. Even when it does, such change may, from the Iranian point of view, be considered a distinction without a difference.

Another consequence is the possibility that the United States is no longer seen, if it ever was, as a credible supporter of genuine democratisation. The image of a superpower that does not seem to protect democratic values all the way down at home, that uses violence to topple regimes, and that time after time proofs that it rather cares for its geopolitical interests than democratic ideology, has proved to damage the reputation of the U.S. as ‘the defender of the free world’. The question is whether that is a problem per se. Is it necessary for the U.S. to be perceived as a genuine supporter of democratisation in order for its policy to be effective? Would the average reformist (still) care about the fact that the U.S. is looking for fulfillment of its own interests rather than for genuine democratisation, and therefore refuse U.S. support, when those U.S. interests match his/her own? In many situations it probably will not matter that much; since pragmatism is likely to dominate, policy is not necessarily less effective when the U.S. is not perceived as a credible democracy supporter.32 Considering the ‘bigger geo-political picture’, however, it might prove to make a difference. That will be explained it the final part of this contribution.

32 This issue was also discussed during an interview between Paul Aarts and the author.
Conclusion

A proper final assessment of the effects of U.S. policy aimed at Iranian ‘democratisation’ should, to some extent, put to rest the constantly recycled rhetoric both governments aim at each other. To some extent, because rhetoric matters: it can influence policy and, probably more important, perceptions of large groups of people. Nevertheless, there is more than just rhetoric, which covers this research topic in a dense fog. When the surface is scratched, a more complex image becomes visible: a reality in which it is important to read between the lines, considering the complexity of the issue. A reality, also, in which it is quite difficult to distinguish wrong from right. When taking nuances into account, however, it is possible to come up with a reasonable final reflection.

The 9/11 attacks, besides being a tragic event, brought a chance for the Bush administration to pursue genuine democratisation in the broader Middle East. History, however, turned another way. As many in the U.S. during the Cold War did not seem to realize what democratisation could truly bring, the ‘war on terror’ proves to be a new threat for that awareness. It is important to realize, however, that the ‘war on terror’, with all its facets, did not follow logically from the 9/11 attacks and neither did the continuing support for Middle Eastern non-democratic rulers. To put it differently, the U.S. did not seize the opportunity given by the attacks to pressure autocrats in the Middle East for genuine democratisation: the post 9/11 political situation regarding the character of regimes, to a great extent, remained the same compared to earlier times. Therefore, the perception, and the perception in this case might prove to be real, has been created that the U.S. considers its geopolitical goals to be more important than its aim to spread and support democracy globally. It was already mentioned that such perceptions of a hypocritical America do not necessarily damage the effectiveness of U.S. democratisation policies. Such display of Realpolitik may even prove to be an effective method to preserve U.S. global domination in the short run. Eventually, however, the perception of the U.S. being a hypocrite and a purely egoistic entity, has the potential to contribute to the downfall of U.S. dominance. Perceptions matter regarding the big picture. Rising powers notice time and again that they do not have to count on the U.S. in their search for a (more) rightful division of power and a more equal treatment of all members of the international community. The structure of the UN Security Council, the unequal treatment of several different nuclear powers, and selective support for non-democracies while opposing others; all are points of controversy. Again, the exact outcome of such disputes depends on future configurations of the international system and pragmatism does play a role within that configuration as well. Nevertheless, long term democratisation and stability will only be reached when pursued by a non-arbitrary United States. That, however, does not mean that the U.S. should act in contradiction with its own interests, since, instead, acting as a genuine democracy promoter corresponds with U.S. long term interests. Until now the U.S. has not acted like a responsible superpower with regard to its role as a democracy supporter. Rather than working together with rising and existing powers on a more equal basis and rather than giving them an honest

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chance to position themselves, the U.S. has alienated itself from some of such powers. Maybe it did because, until now, it did not damage the U.S. to behave in such a way. That possibility, however, becomes less likely when the U.S. loses its role as the global hegemonic power: pure self-interest will not secure its place in the world.

Iranian democratisation is part of this broader geopolitical configuration and, therefore, we should not look at the issue in isolation from other factors: it is a piece of the puzzle of the international system. The questions are: ‘where to place it?’ and ‘what to do with it?’ History plays a role here: the events of 1906-1911, the coup of 1953, the 1979 revolution, the American reaction to it, and the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are all influencing contemporary relations between both countries. Considering that legacy, combined with the far-reaching (unnecessarily high inflated) hostility between both, the question comes up whether the U.S. is actually the right actor to keep pressing for Iranian democratisation. As Fukuyama states, ‘I believe at this point in our history, the United States is unfortunately the wrong agent for promoting change in this region [the Middle East]’ (Fukuyama 2005). Some say that, therefore, the best option for the U.S. is to withdraw from the scene for the time being; let the situation calm down. Some may even advice to ‘let the people of Iran sort it out themselves’ and under the Algiers agreement of 1981, which states ‘that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran’s internal affairs’ (Maloney 2007: 43), it actually should. That idea, however, seems to be wishful thinking as such an approach is not very likely for a superpower to follow. Another possibility is (radical) adjustment of U.S. policies and attitude aimed at Iran. Patterns of interaction can be changed when governments change their self-image, their images of ‘the other’, and, therefore, their attitude, behavior and approach. For this to happen, one of both has to take the first step: why not the most dominant power to make that move? Indeed, that does not relief Iran from any responsibility: since it takes two to tango, in order for such a move to be effective Iran would have to react to such a gesture in a cooperative way. If the U.S. is able to escape the perception of being hypocrite by means of such an approach, it might realize long-term (geopolitical) interests without being seen as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Implementing far-reaching change, however, is easier said than done. Human agency is limited by structure, even if hostile relations are self-made. This applies to Obama’s administration as well: although changing the approach of the U.S. towards Iran to some extent already, for example by reaching out to the masses, emphasizing Iran’s special role within the international community as an ancient civilization, and accentuating Iran’s sovereignty, Obama faces the pressure of being punished for his Iran-policy at home. Change is further obstructed by path dependency, the multi-level character of global politics and the legacy of continuing negative identification between the U.S. and Iran. Nevertheless, structures can be altered, even if that is a very long process. It takes a strong leader to take the risks involved in such an undertaking. Many had hoped for Obama to be that leader and expected him to do more than he has been willing to do so far. The current situation, however, seems to be heading for a negative spiral which, when the process of negative identification continues long enough, will be difficult to alter. Even a military strike, although currently unlikely, is - on the condition that the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan will improve

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35 This point was mentioned by Jamaseb Soltani, an Iranian, in an interview with the author.
for the U.S. - not unthinkable. That, however, would be a disaster for (Middle East) democratisation in the short and in the long run.

Is it too late for Obama to change this dark looming scenario? Not if he is willing to change his policy and approach towards Iran drastically on short notice, whereby his own political future will be on the line. Not if he is willing to resolve difficult but unavoidable trade-offs among democracy promotion and other strategic U.S. interests. Not if he is willing to accept that it is not possible to export U.S.-style democracy and then speak of freedom. Not if he is willing to face the fact that no coherent strategy exists and that one that focuses on long term processes is needed. And finally, not if he manages to find the delicate balance between doing too much and doing too little. At this moment in time such change seems far away. Besides that, democratisation processes remain unpredictable, no matter what. And in order to be long-lasting, the initial moves toward democracy, together with the desire for it, have to come from within. Outside support, when it is low scale and sincere, might prove to be useful, although indirect and marginal (McFaul 2007: 45). Besides, it is important to realize that it takes more than just proper U.S. policy to reach democracy in Iran. Therefore, Burnell & Youngs are right when they state that ‘it is perhaps too easy to attribute too much – for good or bad – to the vicissitudes of U.S. policies’ (Burnell & Youngs 2010: 190). Trita Parsi adds ‘that too often Iranians think that the United States has the capability to do almost anything. Particularly when you are frustrated you want the superpower to step in and fix things quickly. But I think they have seen [that] the U.S. often times has not the power to do so and, perhaps more importantly, it does not often times have the competence of doing so. You just have to take a look in the rest of the region to see that as a superpower its ability to promote stable democracy is not necessarily as good as what we perhaps could wish it would be’. Until the internal opposition proves strong enough to truly oppose the regime, until the external dimension (of which the U.S. is a very important factor) proves to be properly configurated in order to provide valuable support, and until both dimensions complement each other properly, genuine Iranian democratisation, in whatever form, remains a democratisation that could happen and might happen, but will not any time soon.

36 Mentioned by Parsi in an interview with ‘Week in Green’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3HagaVVL2k)
37 And even when all these requirements are met, other factors are still able to make democratisation impossible.
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