

If There Was a Time to Support Reformists in Iran, It's Now

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAY 24 2018

If ever there was a time to support reformists in Iran, it is now. If ever there was a reason to support reformists in Iran, it is Israel. Iran and Israel came in February perilously close to serious military conflagration, and in May, Iran and Israel came close to war again. Iran, supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Assad in Syria, is understood by some to have fought a sort of proxy war with Israel through Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah, while allied with Iran and Syria for significant political reasons to do in part with proxy wars for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran, may conceptualize its own role slightly differently, seeing itself as motivated by what it sees as its own sovereign national interests. Now that it is a part of the Lebanese national government, that self-understanding appears more difficult to discredit, enemy though the organization is to the U.S. (as well as to Israel – and the mass Syrian people's uprising).

But, when Iran and Israel come close to war, it puts all of us in danger of a World War III. Remember, Syria is that space and population that we abandoned when the mass population stood up for democracy against the Assad regime, leaving hundreds of thousands murdered in the streets by a brutal dictatorship. Fortunately, Iran and Israel, those two important military powers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) stood down quickly both in February and in May after their respective shows of force.

Why would reformists matter in Iran? Because they tend to be moderate on relations with the West. Plain and simple. And because they tend to be pro-democracy. And, at that statement, inevitably, some amongst us squirm at the suggestion of democracy in an Islamic context.

I think it is time for each one of us to look ourselves in the mirror and engage in an honest self-appraisal. Many of us in the West say that we are in favor of democracy. And, some among us add: *but we cannot support it if we don't know the regime that will come out of it*. If you find yourself on that end of the spectrum, my friends, it means that you are *not* pro-democracy. It means that you do not believe that democracy is the best form of government in all times and places. It means that you do not really believe that the human world is best organized when people rule themselves, whatever their religions or ideologies. Period.

Competing ideologies across nation-states may always end in war. But let those wars be honestly reached through the real ideological spectrum of a population, not through the ideological myopia of brutal dictatorships who effectively represent no one but themselves.

Let us stop making grand gestures and grand statements about democracy in MENA. And, just as importantly, let us stop blaming MENA for the resilience of authoritarianism in that region. Country after country has displayed, at the level of the voting public, its preference for democratic, participatory rule throughout the Arab Spring. The only way to overthrow dictators who are willing to use guns is through revolution. That is what the Arab Spring was. It is what the Syrian people's uprising has been. And it has, as we know, included Iran. With the exception of Tunisia, we have, in action, refused to stand up for our word of supporting democracy in the Middle East.

So, I ask, please do not say you are in favor of democracy if you are not. If you are, then fight for democracy in Iran.

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The range of social, political, ideological, and, yes, even religious constituencies will come out and fight for their agendas across that state. That will allow voices other than conservative mullahs to be heard, which is effectively all that we have now. If the power of the entire range of social, political, ideological, and religious voices as the best way to run a political system is not what you believe in – including for Iran – let's get honest and say it.

With this honesty, we would have saved, by now, hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives who stood up for democracy in their regimes across MENA (web link numbers from 2016 – they are greater now). The cluster-disaster of the mass mobilization of the Syrian people's uprising against Assad is fore among them. It is in large part our failure to support the democracy movement in Syria that brought us ISIS/ISIL/Daesh, which used the political vacuum in Syria to establish a significant power center there. We have ISIS/ISIL/Daesh because of our unwillingness stand up for our own word when people across MENA stood up for it for us.

So, let us make our words correspond with our actions. Making theory correspond with practice is not a fairy tale expectation. It is what tells us that we are what we say we are. Otherwise, we have to change the theories. And, as scholars, making sure that our theories correspond with our actual political practices is something that is well within our ambit of skill and ability. When there is a significant difference between our theories and our political practices, I assure you, it is cried to the Heavens and the streets across the Middle East. It is a mobilizing force. We can do without another World War, another version of ISIS/ISIL/Daesh, or some other new invention or coalition even worse than that.

It can get worse. Do not let the lesson of 9/11 be lost on us. Do not let us have a failure of imagination now.

In his speech before the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in Jerusalem, U.S. Vice President Michael Pence put out an olive branch to Iran's reformists even as he affirmed the rightness of recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. That is *in every way* the right approach to peace in (and with) MENA. Trump and Pence are not candy-coating a slick line to sell to the Middle East; they are telling it as they see it and approaching it very much as it is.

People in MENA are not stupid. They do not forget easily. They know very well when they are being fed porridge while some amongst us wax lyrical about our offerings of cake. So, my suggestion, said not so politely, is this: either make it cake, or shut up.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).