
Dr. Trita Parsi

U.S. Attack Would Bolster Iran Government

Here is the testimony of the president of the National Iranian American Council, Dr. Trita Parsi, to the Congressional oversight briefing.

Thank you. It's a great pleasure being here today and I'm particularly grateful that our hosts have created this opportunity to discuss these very important issues.

There are many issues about Iran, and a potential military conflict with Iran that haven't been sufficiently discussed and debated in Washington. Whether Iran actually is a threat is one of them, as is the question of whether Iran poses an imminent problem or if time is available.

Another question that has received far too little attention is what the reactions of the Iranian people would be to a military conflict and how that in turn would affect America's position in the strategically vital region of the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea in the long term.

It is a well known fact that America has lost much—if not most—of its soft-power in the Middle East. The Muslim streets are angry at us, particularly in countries whose governments we tend to be on good terms with.

In 2003, according to a Pew Poll, only 15 % of Indonesians, the world's largest Muslim state, viewed America favorably. In Pakistan, only 13%, Turkey 15%, and Jordan, a whopping 1%.

Winning the hearts and minds of the peoples of the region is extremely important. We cannot achieve any other of our objectives if the masses in the Middle East oppose us. At a minimum, the idea that we support democracy rings very hollow if we don't care what the peoples of the region think of us.

We clearly have to do more, much more, to win the hearts and minds of the peoples of the Middle East.

By all accounts, however, we don't face this problem in Iran. The population in Iran tends to have very favorable views of American culture, American values, and of Ameri-



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cans. There probably isn't a single Iranian that doesn't have a relative that lives in the United States and is part of the approximately one-million strong Iranian-American community. These Iranians hear from their American relatives of all the opportunities that exist in America, of the good lives that they have here.

This does not mean, however, that they also favor U.S. foreign policy. In fact, polls show that they don't.

But their favorable view of America is a great strategic asset that can help advance American interest in the region for generations to come.

So while we have to continue to work to win the hearts and minds of other people in the Middle East, in Iran, all we need to do is to make sure that we don't lose them.

By the first bullet, by the first bomb, or by the first boot on the ground, we will lose this asset.

Perhaps the reason why Iranians like Americans so much is because they are so similar. When under attack, when terrorists fly into the Twin Towers, Americans unite, they rally around the flag.

Iranians do the same. They are no different. In fact, there is very compelling historical evidence for this.

In 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini was in the midst of a vicious political struggle for the future of the Iranian revolution. He had not consolidated his power, not yet.

Then, in September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran.

In spite of their differences, Iranians rallied around the flag. They united. Within weeks, more than 100,000 volunteers rushed to the front lines to fight the invaders.

In fact, according to many experts, Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic survived not in spite of, but because of the Iraqi attack.

If history repeats itself, as it often does, then an attack on Iran would likely result in:

- Iranians rallying around the flag—rather than people turning on their government, as Saddam thought.
- The Iranian government would strengthen its hold on the country—rather than being toppled.
- The hearts and minds of the Iranian people (which has taken us a full generation to win back) would be lost rather than America being greeted as a liberator.
- And, I might add, the Iranian nuclear program would most likely accelerate, rather than be destroyed.

The asset that is the hearts and minds of the Iranian people should not be forgotten in this debate. It is particularly important to the Iranian-American community that this aspect is made known to decision-makers in Washington.

The data that we have at the National Iranian American Council shows that even though Iranian Americans overwhelmingly do not favor the current government in Iran, they look at what is taking place in Iraq, and they simply don't feel envy. And I think we can rest assured that people in Iran feel the same way.