



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## "Talking About Tehran: Can Better Strategic Communications Help the U.S. In Iran?"

New America Foundation

1899 L Street NW

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The New America Foundation hosted an event to explore the value of strategic communications and whether or not the United States should apply various types of public diplomacy as part of the overall strategy toward Iran. **Steve Clemons**, Director of the American Strategy Program at New American, moderated a discussion featuring **James Glassman**, Director of the George W. Bush Institute and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Glassman opened by observing that public diplomacy and strategic communications are not being fully exploited as tools of foreign policy by the current administration. With regard to Iran, he predicts three possible outcomes: 1) armed conflict (undesirable); 2) successful diplomacy (increasingly unlikely); or 3) the Iranian people will either produce a change in the attitude of the regime, or a new regime altogether. While some policymakers argue that overt support for the opposition would allow the regime to tar the Green Movement with a broad brush of foreign interference, Glassman maintained that the regime did this anyway regardless of U.S. involvement.

**Public diplomacy, he said, is a means not an end – it is a particular set of tools to influence foreigners to help the U.S. achieve specific goals.** Expounding upon this, he described the theory of strategic communications as the use of the entire government apparatus to send signals that can have a powerful influence on foreign publics, and in turn governments. "Not only when we do things," he said, "but when we don't do them." He thinks that the "tepid response" of U.S. to the Iranian protests sent perhaps one or more signals: that the Green Movement lacked substance and authority; that the U.S. was too weak to take on the regime; or that the regime was truly the only source of legitimacy throughout the nation.

Although the administration has slowly shifted toward showing more support for the opposition, Glassman insists that it's not enough. "We need a broad, robust strategic communications program that integrates words and deeds to change the character of the Iranian leadership." This type of program includes 4 elements: **1) disseminating information with lessons from dissidents and freedom advocates from other parts of the world – particularly those who've engaged in nonviolent campaigns of civil disobedience; 2) tightening sanctions on the Iranian economy; 3) increasing communications within Iran as well as between Iran and the outside world; and 4) refuting, in a campaign style, the major points of Iranian propaganda.**

Glassman did praise **Obama** for the Voice Act that authorized \$55 million for development of technologies that enhance the Iranian people's ability to receive and send various types of content – but he expressed disappointment that only about half of the money was actually appropriated. As far as

steps that can be taken immediately, Glassman suggested that the government protest the Iranian regime's jamming of TV broadcasts into Iran, which is "damaging the ability of Iranians to get the truth."

He also hailed "public diplomacy 2.0" as a much more functional set of tools than previous policies that amounted to "standing in one place and spraying a message." Instead, it **"generates a wide and deep conversation where we are a facilitator and a convener – a new approach that takes advantage of social networking technologies to have multiple conversations in both words and pictures."**

Glassman believes that this type of communication is a reflection of American values, in the sense that we do not dictate, but rather provide open forums where no views are drowned out and the best ideas ultimately prevail.

**Steve Clemons** kicked off the Q&A session by challenging Glassman on whether his proposed comprehensive approach would be undermined by a U.S. tax-payer funded effort. Glassman responded that the U.S. certainly can't be heavy-handed about it, but public diplomacy 2.0 is specifically intended to avoid tools of dictation, which Glassman thinks might encourage a more open and fruitful dialogue that places the emphasis upon the Iranian people, and not upon the U.S.

Next, **Matt Duss** asked if the U.S. truly has the credibility to speak to the Iranian public about autocratic regimes since the U.S. has such a complicated history with other regimes in the Middle East, to which Glassman replied that one of the more unrecognized dynamics in the region is conflict between Iran and other Arab governments. He also insisted that public diplomacy oftentimes has an easier time supporting democracy advocates since official diplomacy must ensure the preservation of relations with official government actors.

Elaborating on various Internet tools, Glassman stressed that the U.S. needs to do more to facilitate consistent access to online tools such as Gmail and other popular networking sites. However, none of these policy proposals are meant to overthrow the regime, and Glassman emphasized that it's up to the Iranians to determine the type of government they want – but these tools are simply intended to empower their voices. **The U.S. government can do more to convene private organizations and provide them with seed money to perform various kinds of public diplomacy.** "Ultimately, the private sector tends to be very good at this kind of thing," he said.