



May 24, 2005 Edition > Section: [Foreign](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

Rice Tells Mullahs That Democracy On the Way to Iran

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May 24, 2005

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/14287>

WASHINGTON - Secretary of State Rice yesterday warned Iran's "unelected leaders" that the day will come when their people will demand the same rights and liberties recently sought by Iraqis and Lebanese.

Speaking at the annual policy conference for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Ms. Rice said to thunderous applause, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Middle East is changing and even the unelected leaders in Tehran must recognize this fact. They must know that the energy of reform that is building all around them will one day inspire Iran's citizens to demand their liberty and their rights. The United States stands with the people of Iran."

Ms. Rice's remarks could signal that the Bush administration is growing impatient with the stalled European-led negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Only three months ago, Ms. Rice said that America would consider lifting its objections to Iran joining the World Trade Organization and the sale of airplane parts to the Islamic Republic in exchange for good-faith efforts to end its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Her predecessor, Colin Powell, in 2003 pledged that America would not interfere in the internal affairs of Iranian politics, which he referred to as a "family fight."

At the conference Ms. Rice played to the crowd. In her opening lines she said, "judging by how many students I see in the audience today, I know that Aipac's future is clearly going to be bright." The line was a subtle vote of confidence for an organization that has been dogged by allegations that two of its former employees are targets of an FBI probe into mishandled classified information and possible espionage. On Sunday, Aipac's executive director said his organization is not a formal target of the bureau's investigation.

In her remarks yesterday, the secretary of state also called Prime Minister Sharon's plan to remove Jewish settlers from Gaza an "unprecedented and incredibly delicate opportunity" for peace. She also touted reform efforts in the Middle East. "I speak to these reform efforts because the United States looks to a future and has a vision of a day when Israel is no longer the sole democracy in the Middle East," she said to loud applause.

But her warning to Iran's mullahs represented the most potentially significant policy shift for the administration. In the last two months, some State Department officials and European diplomats have suggested that nuclear negotiations would resume when Iranians elected a new president on June 17. But the process leading up to those elections has not met Western standards. Over the weekend, Iran's Guardian council disqualified all but six of the hopefuls for the post to be vacated by Iran's outgoing president, Mohammed Khatami. The Associated Press yesterday quoted the council's chief, Ayatollah

Ahmad Janati, as saying, "Thoughts of the president have to be in line with the thoughts of the supreme leader."

The State Department is now reviewing whether to grant money set aside by Congress to pro-democracy groups inside Iran. If these grants go through, it would mark the first time such public funds would be given to organizations inside the country since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and 1981 Algiers Accord, an agreement Iran has said requires America to refrain from meddling in its internal affairs.

The threat posed by Iran was a hot topic yesterday at Aipac, which set up an extensive interactive presentation on the history of the country's nuclear program. When the group's activists take to Capitol Hill today to lobby their representatives, one of the top pieces of legislation will be new sanctions against Iran linked to its nuclear program.

After Ms. Rice's remarks, Rep. Jane Harman, a Democrat from California, suggested in a public discussion that America work through the U.N. Security Council to entice the Iranians to abandon their nuclear ambitions. For this suggestion she was booed by the pro-Israel activists in attendance. When her discussion partner, American Enterprise Institute scholar Richard Perle, suggested that America work to support the grass roots opposition in Iran, he met applause. Ms. Harman, who is the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, concurred with Mr. Perle's recommendation.

Mr. Perle then told the lunchtime crowd at the Washington Hilton that he was about to contact one of the leaders of the July 9, 1999, demonstrations in Tehran. The leaders are honored each year by the opposition. At the event, he said he would tell Ahmad Batebi, who has recently been released from Evin Prison, that Ms. Harman too supported his cause to unseat the unelected regime in his country. Mr. Batebi was imprisoned after he appeared holding up a bloody T-shirt on a 1999 cover of the Economist. Since then, the photo has graced many opposition posters and Web sites.

During a later interview, Mr. Perle said that he had spoken five times with Mr. Batebi, who has contacted him through intermediaries, for months. Mr. Perle did not make the phone call yesterday, he said, after realizing that Iranian intelligence operatives may trace the call after monitoring his remarks at the Aipac conference.

Mr. Perle said that through his conversations with Mr. Batebi, he is persuaded that the opposition in Iran yearns to hear the kind of words Ms. Rice said yesterday. "They are hoping to get a message through to the administration, they need moral support, there has been no suggestion that they want military intervention or anything like that. They want Americans to know they have been deprived of basic human rights and want Americans to support them," Mr. Perle said.

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