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On Iran, do nothing

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

Fareed Zakaria has a must read column in today's *Washington Post* about America's policy towards Iran.

He argues that what we are watching in Iran is essentially a coup in which the Revolutionary Guard and its allies in the military and political classes have grabbed power from the clerical regime. He notes the number of senior Iranian clergy who have not endorsed the election results that are widely believed to have been rigged in favor of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad among other sources of evidence for a split between the clergy and the military.

It is small comfort to think that Iran is now ruled by thugs rather than radical Shiite mullahs. But, at the very least, this will force us in the West to stop over-simplifying the Muslim world by assuming that radicals are always motivated by religion, or that religious leaders are necessarily radicals. It turns out that secularists are capable of outrageous acts and extremist sentiments too. This should not be news when you consider that the three great monsters of the last century -- Hitler, Stalin and Mao -- were none of them motivated by a religious vision.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard may have more in common with other regimes in the Mideast that are based on military rule, such as that in Egypt, but they are certainly more intentionally hostile to the West than their Egyptian counterparts, in part because of America's tortured relationship with Iran. We overthrew a popular government in the 1950s and backed the repressive regime of the Shah, many of whose victims are the ancestors of today's Iranian rulers.

Zakaria advises America to do something that is very difficult to do: nothing. Even when America does nothing, it does something, if only to create a vacuum into which other powers can exert their influence. Yet, doing nothing seems better than the alternatives. The millions of people in the streets of Teheran and other cities protesting the fraudulent election testify to the fact that the regime is far from stable. And, the

one way to strengthen the regime is to appear that we are backing its opponents. It is troublesome to think that we must sit by and do nothing. But, it is less trouble than strengthening Ahmadinejad and his fellow thugs.

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