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## **U.S. Program Is Directed at Altering Iran's Politics**

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WASHINGTON, April 8 — As the Bush administration confronts the Tehran government over its suspected nuclear weapons program and accusations that it supports terrorism, a newly created office of Iranian affairs in the State Department is poring over applications for a rapidly expanding program to change the political process inside Iran.

The project, which will spend \$7 million in the current fiscal year, would become many times larger next year if Congress approves a broad request for \$85 million that the Bush administration has requested for scholarships, exchange programs, radio and television broadcasts and other activities aimed at shaking up Iran's political system.

The effort, overseen by Elizabeth Cheney, a deputy assistant secretary of state who is a daughter of Vice President Dick Cheney, has been denounced by Iran's leaders as meddling in their internal affairs.

It comes at a time of escalating confrontation between Iran and the United States over Iran's nuclear program, exacerbated by reports, which the administration has played down, that military contingency plans are being reviewed as well.

While the United States has marshaled international support for diplomatic pressure on Iran, some Asian and European allies have expressed misgivings about other avenues of pressure, which are seen as aimed at undermining the government in Tehran.

One Asian diplomat said the effort was reminiscent of the subsidies the United States provided to Iraqi exile groups in the 1990's. "They don't call it 'regime change,' but that is obviously what it is," he said. But he had to be promised anonymity before he would discuss it, not wanting to create a public rift between his country and the United States on a significant matter of foreign policy.

To find people to promote change in Iran, the State Department has opened a competition for grant applications. A Web site announcement says that applicants "must outline activities linked to reform and demonstrate how the proposed approach would achieve sustainable impact in Iran."

A State Department official said that numerous applications had come in and that the department would have little trouble spending the \$25 million in the next year. But he acknowledged that various groups were squabbling over how best to promote reform and who would be most effective in doing so.

"Iran is governed by an unelected clerical elite not accountable to the people," the official said, speaking anonymously under ground rules imposed by the department. "But

despite considerable personal risk, we are seeing some activists willing to step forward."

The biggest problem for the applicants is the amount of risk they might incur. There have been reports in Iran of advocates of change being arrested after having met with American officials at conferences, though some experts charge that Iran has exaggerated those reports in order to discourage contacts with the West.

Other experts said that some of the people who were stepping forward might not be the best ones to get the money.

"It sounds good to fund civil society groups, but not when you don't know who the groups are," said Vali R. Nasr, an Iranian-born professor of national affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. "No real group wants a direct affiliation with the United States. It will just get them into trouble with the government."

Administration officials said a few top American officials had been traveling the country, particularly to Los Angeles, to meet with Iranian exile organizations, many of them supporters of the monarchy of Shah Reza Pahlavi, who was overthrown in 1979. Some of the Los Angeles groups operate satellite radio and television stations that beam programs into Iran.

But State Department officials said they were not likely to enlist groups associated with the monarchy because, in their view, they do not seem to have much support in Iran.

Lorne W. Craner, president of the International Republican Institute, a foundation linked to the Republican Party, said, "There are plenty of people out there who have a checkered past who you would not want to work with."

The institute, which receives money from Congress and grants from the State Department, has in the last couple of years linked up with groups and individuals in Iran and offered them training at places outside the country. The groups cannot be identified for fear of their safety, he said.

State Department officials and various advocates for change consulted by the department said that for now the money would probably be concentrated on groups seeking to document human rights abuses and promote women's and labor rights, rather than groups seeking direct political change.

Recipients of such financing in the past said that in order to operate they had to avoid the perception that they are tools of "regime change."

"The administration has consulted many Iranians just to find out who to talk to," said Roya Boroumand, co-director of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, which seeks to document human rights abuses inside Iran. "We try not to be in touch with too many people inside Iran because we know it could be fatal."

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, a new group based in New Haven, has received \$1 million from the State Department and could receive more, officials said. But leaders of the group emphasize that while they have contacts with people in Iran, it is not for the purpose of overthrowing the government.

"We are pro-human rights, but we are not directly seeking regime change," said Maura Johnson, the center's executive director. "That's not our agenda. When you look at many other countries, improved human rights can occur without regime change, through reforms and stronger institutions."

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