

Francesco Bastagli

What Iran Really Wants

It would be premature to forecast the outcome of the unrest that followed the recent presidential elections in Iran. It is, however, possible to consider how this turmoil may impact on Tehran's foreign policy posture. I believe that such impact will be limited. As long as the Islamic régime survives, the basic features and concerns of Iran's international agenda will remain the same. The paramount authority for setting foreign policy will continue to rest with Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Further, no matter what happens in Iran in the coming days, the United States and its allies will still need to come to terms with Tehran. The guarded international response to current events reflects this awareness. Admittedly, a confirmation of Ahmadinejad's victory and a possible conservative backlash may strengthen Israeli fears and delay Washington's approach to the negotiating table. In turn, an effort by the Iranian leadership to appease reformist forces and seek a wider basis of consensus may lead to a softer tone on foreign policy issues. However, the substance of Tehran's concerns will not change, neither will the challenges to be confronted by those who will have to address them.

Since the time for sitting at the same table is approaching, the two parties must first of all

grasp the essentials of their mutual expectations. What the United States and its allies want from Iran is fairly clear. But what is on Tehran's mind? Perceived as a major menace by Washington and Tel Aviv, Tehran sees itself under attack. To understand Iran's expectations one must turn the Western perspective around 180 degrees.

Memories go back a long way in the Middle East and history is indispensable to understand Tehran's outlook. Foreign meddling in Iranian affairs dates back to the Anglo-Russian rivalry of the early 19th century. On and off this meddling has continued to this day. It should be no surprise that a request for non-interference is a recurrent theme in Iran's negotiations with the West. Take the last formal agreement between Iran and the United States, the Algiers Accords signed in January 1981. In setting out the terms for the release of the US hostages in Tehran – they had been accused of spying – the Accords include a pledge that the US would not intervene «directly or indirectly, politically or militarily» in Iran's internal affairs. It is hard to argue that this pledge was honored. Encouraged and supported by the United States and largely bankrolled by the Saudis, Saddam's war of aggression against Iran started around the time of the signing of the

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Abstract

History is indispensable for understanding the outcome of the instability that has followed Iran's recent presidential elections.

Foreign meddling in Iranian affairs dates back to the Anglo-Russian rivalry of the early 19th century. It should be no surprise that requests for non-interference are a recurrent theme in Iran's negotiations with the West.

The US must realize that progress will prove to be elusive unless it is addressed with broader commitment to mutual respect among equals. Credible regional security guarantees must also be factored in early on in the process.

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Accords. The war lasted for eight years; it took one million lives. The wounds of that conflict are still open for many Iranian families.

US trade and financial sanctions began with the 1979 Islamic revolution and have been growing in scope ever since. They affect many aspects of Iranian life, from the constraints imposed on small businesses to the impossibility to modernize an aging civil aircraft fleet. At the same time, US intelligence – occasionally relying on regional partners – has propped up minority rebel groups in the Baluchistan, Kurdistan and oil-rich Khuzestan regions of Iran. Through Congressional action and President Bush's directive of April 2007 the US has allocated tens of millions of dollars for clandestine activities in Iran. While President Obama has recently stated that the US will no longer seek «régime change» in Tehran, the bulk of these decisions still stand. Concern over them is magnified as Iran looks across its borders. Today the American military are present in a fighting mode in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan. Close US allies such as Israel and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons and such weapons may be present, or easily deployed by the US military, in the Persian Gulf.

No doubt, the war of words has been high pitched on both sides. When matched against deeds, however, the menacing expressions that came out of Washington until a few months ago were especially credible to Iranian ears. Iran stands both insecure and defiant. As Western capitals talk about the

containment of Tehran, many in Iran and throughout the Middle East believe it is the US and its allies that need containing. They see Iranian behavior that causes grave concern in America and Europe as reactive rather than proactive, defensive rather than aggressive. From this perspective, support for Hezbollah and Hamas is a sort of forward front to keep the opponent engaged in theaters away from home, reciprocating destabilization with destabilization. The Iranian nuclear programme, if indeed intended to produce the bomb, is to them a deterrent in a region where atomic weapons are already present, in hostile hands such as Israel's and not subject to international control.

What matters most at this time is not whether Iranian perceptions are justified. Rather, it is essential to recognize that somehow they will have to be dealt with. Iran's nuclear adventure looks set to be the initial topic of discussion. The US must realize that progress on this and other specific issues will prove elusive if they are not addressed within a broader commitment to non-interference and mutual respect among equals. Credible regional security guarantees must also be factored early on into the process. As mentioned above, any repositioning of Tehran's leadership following the current events may adjust the tone but not the substance of this long-standing, vital concern of Tehran. No matter how problematic a grand bargain with Iran may look, anything less will turn out to be no bargain at all.

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