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## U.S. Foreign Policy toward Iran in the Obama Era

Current hostility between the United States and Iran runs deep because of the historical grievances each side brings to the conflict. Many Americans are unaware that in 1953, the CIA helped engineer a coup against the democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. Iranians typically view this event as the beginning of bad blood between the nations. In contrast, Americans who do not know this history believe the 1979 Islamic revolution and seizure of 52 American hostages precipitated the animosity. It should come as no surprise that countries that view the past so differently also see the future in starkly different terms.

A negotiated bargain between Washington and Tehran will not be easy to achieve because the two nations' interests fundamentally diverge. American security interests in the Middle East revolve around access to petroleum resources, the elimination of terrorist threats, stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and protecting Israel. On each of these core objectives, Iran seems to stand athwart U.S. goals. But the opposite is also true. Iran's primary interests are regime survival and regional hegemony. The United States and Israel appear to be the

biggest threats to these ambitions<sup>1</sup>.

The next 18 months will prove critically important to U.S.-Iranian relations, which currently stand at an impasse. First, newly-elected President Barack Obama, whose last name in Farsi sounds like the phrase "he is with us", entered office having pledged to engage Iran using "aggressive, principled diplomacy without self-defeating preconditions"<sup>2</sup>. This openness to negotiate directly is a marked change from the policies of President George W. Bush, whose administration tried to isolate and ignore Iran. Second, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claims to have won a second presidential term in very controversial fashion. The spirited campaign and post-election violence demonstrate that there are those in Iran who yearn for change, and the determination of these dissenters may lead the powerful clerics to consider softening some of their more oppressive policies. Third, U.S.

<sup>1</sup> See N.A. OZCAN - O. OZDAMAR, *Iran's Nuclear Program and the Future of U.S.-Iranian Relations*, in «Middle East Policy», 16, 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 124-26; and M. MILANI, *Tehran's Take*, in «Foreign Affairs», 88, 4 (July/August 2009).

<sup>2</sup> B. OBAMA, *Speech to the AIPAC Policy Conference*, 4 June 2008, [http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/PC\\_08\\_Obama.pdf](http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/PC_08_Obama.pdf).

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### Abstract

The next 18 months will prove critically important to U.S.-Iranian relations, which currently stand at an impasse. First, newly-elected President Barack Obama entered office having pledged to engage Iran using "aggressive, principled diplomacy without self-defeating preconditions." This openness to negotiate directly is a marked change from the policies of President George W. Bush. Second, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claims to have won a second presidential term in very controversial fashion. The spirited campaign and post-election violence demonstrate that there are those in Iran who yearn for change, and the determination of these dissenters may lead the powerful clerics to consider softening some of their more oppressive policies. Third, U.S. intelligence agencies believe that, should it choose to accelerate its enrichment activities, Iran will be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon sometime between 2010 and 2015.

Despite seemingly intractable differences, there are reasons to be guardedly optimistic about the future of U.S.-Iranian bilateral relations. Though burdened with political constraints on its freedom of action, the Obama administration already has made overtures to Iran that may appear merely symbolic but have historically proven successful at breaking the ice in preparation for larger diplomatic initiatives.

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intelligence agencies believe that, should it choose to accelerate its enrichment activities, Iran will be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon sometime between 2010 and 2015<sup>3</sup>.

With time running out before Iran acquires a breakout enrichment capability, the most difficult part of developing a nuclear weapon, Obama and Ahmadinejad have until the end of 2010 to achieve progress on key differences. After a year and a half, both countries may be forced back into more antagonistic postures by long-standing domestic and international political influences that are beyond their control. Despite seemingly intractable differences, this paper will argue that there are reasons to be guardedly optimistic about the future of U.S.-Iranian bilateral relations. Though burdened with political constraints on its freedom of action, the Obama administration already has made overtures to Iran that may appear merely symbolic but have historically proven successful at breaking the ice in preparation for larger diplomatic initiatives.

### Constraints on U.S. Policy

International and domestic politics constrain American options *vis-à-vis* Iran. Internationally, the United States is sensitive to the desires and preferences of Israel. While U.S. administrations

have occasionally shown a willingness to ask Israel to do things it does not want to do – such as restraining settlement construction, for example – Israeli security still remains a top priority for Washington. Domestically, U.S. presidents face a Congress that, regardless of whether controlled by Republicans or Democrats, has been hawkish toward Iran in recent years<sup>4</sup>. Republicans tend to see Iran as “evil” and therefore unworthy of American recognition. Democrats, on the other hand, often use Iran in a strategy of political triangulation. In this strategy, Democrats accused of taking “weak” national security positions, such as supporting U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, try to compensate by adopting “strong” aggressive stances toward Iran. An unstoppable political momentum towards more punitive actions against Iran could develop if Republicans and Democrats are not careful.

Another constraint is, quite simply, the U.S. government’s lack of expertise on Iran. Thirty years of severed relations have resulted in a dearth of Iran experts working for and with the U.S. government. The Islamic Republic is “a political system I don’t understand very well”, lamented former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She added: “One of the downsides of not having been in Iran - for 27 years as a government is that we don’t really have people who know Iran inside our own system...we don’t really have

very good veracity or a feel for the place”<sup>5</sup>. Lack of regional or country-specific expertise is an ongoing challenge in the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy, but it has become glaringly obvious in American policy toward Iran.

### Iran Policy under the Bush Administration

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Washington placed retaliation against the Taliban in Afghanistan and elimination of the threat posed by Al Qaeda atop its list of priorities. U.S. officials found Tehran willing and able to cooperate; indeed, Iran harbored immense enmity for the Taliban because its members killed Iranian diplomats in 1988 and subsequently forced as many as two million Afghan refugees into the Khorasan province in eastern Iran. During months of direct, bilateral U.S.-Iranian discussions and cooperation on the Afghanistan issue, American transport aircraft were allowed to use Iranian airfields. Tehran even offered assistance with shipments of humanitarian supplies<sup>6</sup>. Though cooperation proceeded in fits and starts, one U.S. official labeled it “perhaps the most constructive period of U.S.-Iranian diplomacy since the fall of the Shah”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> National Intelligence Council, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, November 2007, [http://odni.gov/press\\_releases/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://odni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> J. ISAACS, *Congress and President Obama’s National Security Agenda*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists Online, 17 March 2009, <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/congress-and-president-obamas-national-security-agenda>.

<sup>5</sup> C. RICE, interview with the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, 8 June 2007, <http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/iran/State/86254.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, *U.S.-Iranian Engagement: The View from Tehran*, 2 June 2009, p. 3, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6131>.

<sup>7</sup> J. DOBBINS, *How to Talk to Iran*, in «Washington Post», 22 July 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

In 2002, U.S.-Iranian cooperation quickly unraveled as the feverish push for war against Iraq accelerated in Washington. First, despite productive bilateral cooperation on Afghanistan, Bush included Iran as a member of his so-called “axis of evil”, which also included Iraq and North Korea. Later that year, Iranian exiles accused Tehran of hiding secret nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, a revelation that severely damaged Iran’s credibility in the United States. After the swift defeat of Saddam Hussein’s forces in early 2003, Washington suspended all talks with Iran in a moratorium that would last from May 2003 until May 2006<sup>8</sup>.

As the United States attempted to ignore and isolate Iran, numerous international efforts to curb Iran’s nuclear activities failed. Meanwhile, the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq degenerated into messy counterinsurgencies and created a power vacuum in the Middle East that placed Iran in a more commanding regional position.

By 2006, it was clear to most experts that Washington’s Iran policy was failing. Hardliners in the White House, particularly in Vice President Dick Cheney’s office, advocated military options and other efforts to depose the Iranian regime. Yet talk of a military strike against Iran, which eventually rose to fever pitch, subsided after a December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the

consensus view of 16 American intelligence agencies, concluded that Iran had suspended its nuclear weaponization (not enrichment) program in 2003 in response to international pressure<sup>9</sup>. The NIE’s finding that Iran was responsive to a mix of punishments and incentives was critical because it suggested that Iran, in the traditional international relations lexicon, was a “rational actor”, not the oft-invoked caricature of “Mad Mullahs” willing to commit suicide by attacking the United States or Israel with nuclear weapons. A rational actor can be dealt with through traditional policy strategies such as negotiations, sanctions, or deterrence, but an irrational actor is far less predictable and much more dangerous.

In its final years in office, the Bush administration pursued a series of half-hearted overtures to Iran, including a 2006 offer to engage directly on the nuclear issue; bilateral discussions on Iraq in 2007; and multilateral nuclear talks in 2008. These efforts were hamstrung by the U.S. precondition that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment prior to the initiation of direct nuclear talks. In other words, the Bush administration wanted the outcome of negotiations – suspension of enrichment – to be ceded before negotiations even began. These terms were understandably unacceptable to Iran.

### Policy under the Obama Administration

During the first six months of 2009, Obama made only slight substantive alterations to U.S. policy toward Iran. Most of the

changes were mere linguistic shifts. However, words do matter in international relations. The evolution in tone from Bush’s “axis of evil” rhetoric to Obama’s respectful overtures has already improved the prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough.

Soon after his inauguration, Obama granted an interview to the Arabic-language television station *Al Arabiya*. He said that “If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us”<sup>10</sup>. A few weeks later, Obama raised the possibility of “direct engagement” where “we can start sitting across the table, face-to-face...to move our policy in a new direction”<sup>11</sup>. Tehran responded to these overtures favorably. While Ahmadinejad insisted that the new U.S. openness to engagement “should be fundamental and not tactical” – seeking to resolve issues and not just to gain political cover for future sanctions and threats – he said that “our people welcome real changes” and are “ready to hold talks based on mutual respect and in a fair atmosphere”<sup>12</sup>.

Despite an unhelpful (but typical) tirade in which

[com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002056.html](http://www.wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002056.html).

<sup>8</sup> S. MALONEY, *U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward*, Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 32, 2 (Summer 2008), p. 34, [http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/summer\\_iran\\_maloney.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/summer_iran_maloney.aspx).

<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 3.

<sup>10</sup> H. COOPER - M. LANDLER, *On Iran, Obama Plans Talk and Some Toughness*, in «New York Times», 3 February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/washington/04diplo.html>.

<sup>11</sup> T. ERDBRINK, *Iran Signals Opening with U.S.*, in «Washington Post», 11 February 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/10/AR2009021000210.html>.

<sup>12</sup> N. FATHI - A. COWELL, *Iran to Begin Tests at Nuclear Station*, in «New York Times», 25 February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/world/middleeast/26iran.html>.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei assailed U.S. support for Israel and reiterated the claim that the Holocaust was “a lie”, Washington followed its initial overtures with an even more ambitious outreach effort: the March *Nowruz* message<sup>13</sup>. In this three minute online video, Obama praised Iranian culture, quoted a Persian poet, and even spoke a little Farsi. “My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties”, said Obama. “Engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect...cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization,” he added. Also noteworthy were Obama’s references to the “Islamic Republic of Iran”, a change from the Bush administration policy of addressing only the “Iranian people” or referring to Iran’s leadership as the “regime”<sup>14</sup>.

Tehran responded to the *Nowruz* message by repeating, amidst some boilerplate anti-U.S. rhetoric, that it would only change if Washington changed. “To prove its credibility, the new U.S. administration must change its policies toward Iran and the region,” said Khamenei. “We have no experience of this new president

and administration...We will wait and see. If you change your attitude, we will change, too. If you do not change, then our nation will build on its experience of the past 30 years”<sup>15</sup>.

The Obama team has pressed on with its policy of direct engagement. First, the United States announced that it would directly participate in international talks with Iran over its nuclear program. The Bush administration tried something similar during its final year in office, but later backed away (due to Iran’s perceived lack of seriousness) and vowed not to repeat the effort<sup>16</sup>. Second, in his widely-publicized speech in Cairo, Obama reaffirmed Iran’s right to peaceful nuclear power under the provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and pledged to negotiate “without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect”<sup>17</sup>. Finally, in an unusual diplomatic maneuver, the administration announced that representatives of the Iranian government could be formally invited to Fourth of July celebrations at American embassies and consulates around the world<sup>18</sup>. Iranian

diplomats have not been invited to attend these events since the two nations broke ties in 1979, but Obama decided to reverse this policy with some “hot dog diplomacy”.

## A Way Forward

How can YouTube videos and hot dogs help the United States and Iran resolve their very serious differences over nuclear weapons, terrorism, and human rights? Obama’s overtures may seem merely symbolic, but there is historical precedent for success in his approach. The visit of a U.S. table tennis team to China in April 1971 is widely regarded as having helped to lay the groundwork for the normalization of U.S.-Chinese relations that ensued. After the team’s visit but before President Richard Nixon triumphantly visited China, the *New York Times* praised “Ping Pong Diplomacy” but noted that “the world will await more substantial moves toward better understanding and the resolution of tensions”<sup>19</sup>. The same thing could be said today about Obama’s outreach to Iran; however, Nixon’s successful overtures to China prove that seemingly symbolic actions can lead to major foreign policy successes.

To extend the Nixon-to-China analogy, a first concrete step for the Obama administration might be to sign a document with Iran similar to the famous 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, which outlined key understandings between Washington

<sup>13</sup> ERDBRINK, *Iranian Leaders Fault Obama, Warn Israel Again*, in «Washington Post», 5 March 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/04/AR2009030400330.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Obama, remarks in celebration of *Nowruz*, 20 March 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz/).

<sup>15</sup> ERDBRINK, *Iran’s Supreme Leader Rebuffs Obama*, in «Washington Post», 22 March 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/21/AR2009032100217.html>.

<sup>16</sup> K. DEYOUNG, *U.S. to Join Talks on Iran’s Nuclear Program*, in «Washington Post», 9 April 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/08/AR2009040802254.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Obama, speech at Cairo University, 4 June 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/).

<sup>18</sup> LANDLER, *A New Iran Overture, With Hot Dogs*, in «New York Times», 1 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/02/world/02/diplo.html>.

[.nytimes.com/2009/06/02/world/02/diplo.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/02/world/02/diplo.html).

<sup>19</sup> In «New York Times», *Beyond Ping-Pong Diplomacy*, 16 April 1971.

and Beijing. A number of high level officials in the United States, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have endorsed such an approach with Iran<sup>20</sup>.

In order to negotiate a high-level *communiqué*, a few “rules of the road” must be adhered to in U.S. communications with Iran. Since U.S.-Iranian rapprochement will rely heavily on public posturing and press statements, these communications guidelines are not to be blithely dismissed – particularly when talking is the only thing either side is willing to do at the moment. These guidelines include:

1. *Do Not Undermine Diplomacy* – Skeptical that negotiations will bear fruit, a few Obama administration officials reportedly believe that direct talks with Iran are important mainly because they provide political cover for more coercive actions down the road. For instance, top administration official Dennis Ross apparently suggested that if Iran continued to expand its nuclear program, at some point in the next few years Obama would need to order military strikes, and the ability to cite past “diplomacy” would be necessary to claim that military action was legitimate<sup>21</sup>. Such sentiments are extra-ordinarily unhelpful and should never be articulated publicly

(whether on- or off-the-record). Not only do they cause Iranian leaders to doubt American sincerity, but they also assume future coercive steps to be a foregone conclusion. Such assumptions could quickly become self-fulfilling prophecies.

2. *Do Not Keep Talking About the “Table”* – When U.S. officials say that “all options are on the table”, everybody knows that they are talking about military force. At this point, it is well-established that the U.S. government is prepared to use force against Iran if a determination is made that such an action is in the national interest of the United States. Having made this policy statement numerous times before, there is no need to continue to repeat it *ad nauseam*. Tehran understands the threat and grasps the implication. The repetition of such statements does not make the United States look stronger or more determined. Instead, it makes Washington look reactionary and uncreative.
3. *Do Not Overreact to Iranian Rhetoric* – The Iranian regime defines itself in terms of its opposition to the United States. Anti-Americanism plays a large role in how the clerics retain their power. Thus, even if diplomatic engagement begins to move forward, the United States should still expect Iranian leaders to issue edicts that are inflammatory and angering. Not every incendiary remark, however, should lead Washington to denounce Tehran or

backpedal on progress. There will be a double standard in the language used by both sides. But it ought to be the goal of American policymakers not to allow Iranian verbal provocations to distract from the fundamental priorities of reaching agreements on nuclear weapons, terrorism, and other key issues.

## Conclusion

The claimed electoral victory of Ahmadinejad may appear to be a setback to U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. But this is not necessarily the case. Because his conservative credentials are unimpeachable, and he enjoys the full backing of the clerics, Ahmadinejad possesses the domestic political cachet required to engage with the West<sup>22</sup>. As is the case in the United States, conservative politicians often have an easier time implementing diplomatic breakthroughs because they are less vulnerable to politically-tinged accusations of weakness.

Tehran in all likelihood has not yet decided how far to proceed with its nuclear effort. But the program's deterrent value is not lost on Iranian leaders whose fundamental objective is to maintain their grip on power in the face of both American democracy promotion programs inside Iran and overt U.S. military threats. As Brookings Institution scholar Suzanne Maloney noted, “No regime is likely to bargain away its ultimate deterrent capability so

<sup>20</sup> Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, July 2004, p. 5, [http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Iran\\_TF.pdf](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Iran_TF.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> F. LEVERETT - H. MANN LEVERETT, Have We Already Lost Iran?, in «New York Times», 23 May 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/opinion/24leverett.html>.

<sup>22</sup> M. SHANE, *A Different Iranian Revolution*, in «New York Times», 18 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/opinion/19shane.html>.

long as it perceives that the final objective is its own eradication<sup>23</sup>.

Regimes rarely change when they are isolated. Isolation increases the ruling elite's desperation, recklessness, and willingness to inflict suffering on its own people. In contrast, engagement may lead to gradual changes over time that can ultimately result in a regime's collapse or more moderate policies. The fall of the Soviet Union was initiated in the 1980s not by ignoring Moscow but by dealing with it directly. The same may hold true for Iran.

It may displease American moral absolutists for Washington to talk to Tehran, but there are no alternative options at the present time. Isolation has not stopped Iran's nuclear development. Military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, while always available as a last resort, offer no prospect of permanent elimination of Iran's nuclear program. Instead, they risk turning Iranian and global public opinion against the United States and might lead to Iranian military retaliation that could quickly escalate out of control.

A change in Iran's behavior, not regime change, should be the objective of U.S. policy toward Iran. Demographic trends, high levels of education, a strong sense of national identity, and the growing illegitimacy of the regime among the majority of the population all point toward an Iranian society ripe for change<sup>24</sup>. To achieve a change

in behavior, however, the Obama administration must not emulate the Bush administration's methods. Isolation entrenches Iranian hardliners, as do military threats and unsubtle democracy promotion programs. Instead of these clumsy tactics, the Obama administration should be, and appears to be, pursuing a policy of change through engagement.

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<sup>23</sup> MALONEY, cit., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> M. MCFAUL - A. MILANI - L. DIAMOND, *A Win-Win U.S. Strategy for Dealing with Iran*, in «The Washington Quarterly», 30, 1

(Winter 2006-07), [http://www.twg.com/07winter/docs/07winter\\_mcfaul.pdf](http://www.twg.com/07winter/docs/07winter_mcfaul.pdf).