

UC Irvine

CSD Working Papers

Title

Iran-US Relations: At a New Cross Roads

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2947q73k>

Author

Pahlavi, Reva

Publication Date

2009-05-27

CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu

Members of the faculty, students, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am very happy to be back at UCI today. It is a special privilege for me to have the opportunity of addressing you at this important crossroad in the relationship between our two countries, and the significance it has for the future of peace and stability in the Middle East.

Let me begin by saying that a good university where one can study in peace and freedom may seem common place to you. But not so for many thousands of students in my homeland whose eager young minds remain constrained and constantly shackled by a closed and dogmatic atmosphere that has been ruthlessly imposed on them by an unpopular dictatorship.

Consequently, universities in my country are not places for critical learning, and students are not given the kind of opportunities that they need to freely debate contemporary issues or contemplate the shape of the future in the manner that is common practice here in the West.

But having said that, I would like to inform you that students in Iranian universities have refused to accept the imposition of the fate prescribed for them by the state as *fait accompli*, and have, through their resistance, remained a major thorn in the eyes of the regime. Their stubborn defiance and their continuing struggle for the promotion of secular democratic values, even from the confines of their “intellectual prison”, has been a source of great inspiration across Iranian society. Indeed, many in Iran credit the robust movement of Iranian students for freedom, justice and human rights, for being a major impetus behind the kind of similar demands that are now being made by Iranian women, labor unions and ethnic groups throughout the country.

Yet, students in Iran continue to remain quite savvy and realistic about their prospects for the future. They are aware of the challenges that lie ahead in the hazardous road which they have chosen to take for the promotion of their aspirations. They know at the same time that their cause is just while recognizing that there is a battle at hand for the future that belongs to them.

Dear Friends,

My cause is to ensure that they emerge victorious in this battle so that our people may ultimately shirk off the combined yoke of religious fanaticism and political despotism that has brought havoc to the lives of ordinary people, and to the standing of our country in the international community.

However, I have no illusions about the obstacles that lie before us, and the difficulties that we continue to face on a daily basis. But it is my solemn conviction that this is a battle we can win!

The clerical regime is a detested and unpopular tyranny that has done nothing in the last 30 years to safeguard or enhance the welfare, peace of mind and the prosperity of the Iranian people, despite having had access to more than \$800 billion of oil revenues! After coming to

power, it did not take the ruling clerics much time to squander the good will of the Iranian people and the international community, and particularly those of our neighbors.

Looking back over time, it is hard to imagine any other outcome, since those who had taken power in Tehran were part and parcel of a revolutionary, revisionist regime that was bent on changing the status quo, not just in the region or in the Islamic world, but everywhere else as well.

However, so long as the regime had not alienated the majority of the population at home, their ambitions for actually implementing the export of their radical ideals and religious extremism were largely confined to senseless ranting and sloganeering. With the exception of adopting a foreign policy based on militant anti-Americanism that came into full view following the seizure of American diplomats in Tehran and which has continued to remain with us to this day, the regime never saw the need to indulge beyond a war of words to demonize states like Israel for violating the rights of the Palestinians, or some Arab states as being subservient lackeys of the US, and in the case of Saudi Arabia and its leadership, which were the prime source of Khomeini's personal venom and hatred, the un-rightful and usurping custodians of Islam's holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina.

But as the initial euphoria that had come about in the aftermath of the revolution started giving way to a more sober understanding of realities at home, things began to change. First and foremost, the prolonged war with Iraq in which hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives were needlessly sacrificed, was used as a vehicle for consolidating fundamentalist rule across the country and brutally crushing every trace of opposition.

Moreover, as the regime's ineptitude became more apparent with the way in which our nation was being so grossly mismanaged, the need to rely on other factors – for example, the construction of a “forward line of defense” for the protection and the preservation of the Islamic Republic – became more urgent; hence, the range of various controversial Iranian policies which we have seen in the course of the last twenty somewhat years, starting with the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon as far back as the early 1980s, to the financial and other support that is given to radical groups like Hamas in Palestine, or the meddling that have gone on with hard-line Shiite groups in Iraq, Afghanistan or Bahrain... and the list can go on.

It is ironic that this whole notion of the Islamic government's quest for a “forward line of defense” should be confirmed and validated by none other than Mohammad Khatami, a former President of the regime. In response to a question posed to him by a senior US diplomat who testified before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier this year, suggesting that Iran's arming of Hezbollah and Hamas could potentially spark a terrible conflict between Israel and others in that region, Khatami had responded by reminding that “Iran planned its line of defense from external lines”. In other words, promoting regional conflict and instability is perceived by the regime as a key consideration of its survival!

So, contrary to the opinion of some who continue harping on how strong the Islamic regime has become as a result of various American policies here and there, my response is to say: Nonsense!

I say this because no government with a strong popular base sacrifices the peace of mind and prosperity of its people in order to exhibit lines of “forward defense” in the manner I just described. In the case of the regime's nuclear ambitions which has now become the centre piece of Iran's dispute with the international community, what kind of government that sits on some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, would subject its own citizens to undue and damaging economic sanctions or potential war through a lack of transparency, if its only real intent was to

pursue a peaceful nuclear program for creating electricity?

Therefore, my suggestion is that, far from being either self assured or strong, the kind of costly aggressive policies which the clerical regime has pursued – whether in support of their surrogates in places like Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan, or those which they have pursued in defiance of the UN Security Council in their dangerous search for nuclear weapons – are clear manifestations of the kind of insecurity that any unpopular regime feels when it knows that is hated by a vast majority of its own people.

I now wish to turn to the all important issue of Iran-US relations at this critical juncture. Despite President Obama's personal popularity and the new momentum which his administration has been able to generate since taking office earlier this year, it is foolish to think that a serious breakthrough with Iran can be achieved, as if the factors that have exacerbated Iran-US relations in the course of the past 30 years have miraculously disappeared!

Since its inception in 1979, the ruling clerics in Iran have pursued ideologically-based policies aiming at the ascendancy of a doctrinaire Shiite state. Enmity with the United States has been a central part of that doctrine. The regime perceives the US as a pillaging force, anchored in the Islamic heartland through the state of Israel, and a corrupting cultural beacon for the Islamic youth. Moreover, the US is seen as the main obstacle that stands in the way of the geo-strategic goals and hegemonic ambitions of the clerical regime in the region.

In the course of the last 30 years, five U.S. presidents have sought to meet this challenge, using to no avail a range of policy tools – from containment to appeasement to plain threat of force. To no little extent this failure has been due to a flawed understanding of the nature of the adversity as well as random and haphazard use of these tools.

Today, the new US administration, in its hope for ending the gridlock that has stifled both parties in the last three decades, has indicated that it privileges engagement over confrontation. But if the objective of the dialogue is to dissuade the Islamic regime from pursuing its current policies, a first question to ask is: what leverage does President Obama have for ensuring a different outcome? If this leverage is predicated on America's restored world standing and Mr. Obama's own personal prestige and popularity, the US government may still be in for more frustrations and disappointments.

It is quite possible that the Islamic leadership will respond to a call for engagement in order to gain the moral legitimacy it lacks by becoming a dialogue partner to the US President and his western allies, without any willingness to compromise on the kind of key issues that are critical for both the US and its Western allies. If President Obama's objective from direct engagement with Iran is to use diplomatic channels to persuade the Iranian regime to change some of its key controversial policies such as its nuclear ambitions or its various negative regional interferences, then as we have already witnessed in recent weeks, he is in for a big surprise. In fact, it is the Iranian leadership which is calling the shots and asking for the US to change its behavior, before they sit down to talk!

My primary concern here is that, at the end of the day, millions of nameless freedom loving Iranians who are the West's only real natural friends and allies in Iran, should not bear the brunt of any mishap as a consequence of any possible misperception.

Here it is most pertinent that I say something about President Obama's much publicized Iranian New Year message that was widely distributed on March 21st. Unlike his predecessor, in a message that was deliberately addressed to both the Iranian people and the Iranian government, President Obama made specific reference to the words of one of Iran's most eminent and revered poets, Saadi, who lived in the 13th Century. As a matter of fact, the very same poem also graces

the entrance to the Hall of Nations of the United Nations building in New York, with this call for breaking all barriers:

Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain.

My country's rich history of culture and civilization has ingrained Saadi's words into the subconscious of the overwhelming majority of our people who are today the main victims of their brutal and bloodstained rulers.

While I applaud President Obama for his courage and initiative in wanting to advance a new agenda, I am not at all sure about the wisdom of putting a suffering people on the same footing as an oppressive government. By highlighting this point, my aim is to draw your attention to the responsibility that we all have, as human beings, for showing care and compassion for those most in need of our understanding.

In the case of Iran, I assure you that it is the people and not their ruthless government that needs to be assured of this understanding. It is they who need your support and solidarity, and not their oppressive government.

I do not object to the new US administration's call for engagement and dialogue with the Islamic Republic, if that should serve the higher interests of world peace. But if a sober assessment should bring us to conclude that the Islamic regime is unlikely to deviate from its ideological line and enmity towards the United States, then it may be worth recalling that the real Iran has little in common with those who have usurped power and face the world with a clenched fist.

This is a good juncture to tell you why the debate between idealists and adherents of realpolitik has not led to a solution for dealing with the Islamic Republic effectively. Idealists emphasize democracy and human rights over security and economic interests, while realpolitik does the reverse.

But in the case of Iran this is a false dichotomy. Here, idealism is realism! The history of nuclear diplomacy with Iran provides ample proof that external economic and diplomatic pressures are not enough to make the clerical regime change course. One must look at support for democracy and human rights as the means of increasing internal popular pressure on the regime for it to yield. It is not that diplomats should add human rights and democracy to their list of demands, adding to their burden. I argue that policies that strengthen the voices of Iranian people will be the most important instrument of pressure available to diplomats. That is why I say: "here idealism is realism."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Prior to concluding my remarks, I want to just say a few words regarding the so-called presidential elections in Iran. To all the hype that is being given to this upcoming event that is scheduled for June 12th, I just want to remind you of the following:

Today, Iran is not a democracy, and the election process does not in any shape or form reflect the will and aspirations of the Iranian people!

Thus any submission to the propaganda put forth by Iranian lobbyists and apologist who harp on the fact that, contrary to some other countries in the Middle East, “at least some form of elections are conducted in Iran!” is highly misleading.

In simple terms, all the candidates are closely vetted by the state, and irrespective of the kind of differences that they may have in style or presentation, they all adhere to the same agenda when it comes to most issues of consequence to ordinary people in the country or the international community. At the end of the day, whoever is elected must carry out in full whatever decision or policy that is prescribed for him by the country’s Supreme Leader. In short, whether Ahmadinejad is re-elected or not will not make much of a difference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, let me reiterate that my compatriots’ hopes and aspirations for a promising future in a free and prospering society should not be compromised for the sake of certain ploys that will in all probability come to nothing. It should never be forgotten that beneath the unpleasant face of people like Khamenei or Ahmadinejad, there exists another Iran; an Iran which yearns for change.

Female activists, restless youths, unionists, teachers and academics, writers and artists, ethnic and religious minorities, and disenfranchised citizens have been part of a nation-wide struggle for change.

These are the true voice of Iran! These are the people that risk all for a better tomorrow...

And I implore you: do not deny my valiant compatriots, your support. You must let the youth of Iran know that they are not alone, that you have heard their cry for freedom.

You must not, you cannot, in all conscience, turn your back on them in their hour of need; for **THEY...ARE...THE FUTURE!**