

IRAN AND AMERICA: IS RAPPROCHEMENT FINALLY POSSIBLE?

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Iranian-American relations, as is well known, have been notoriously poor ever since the 1979 revolution toppled the shah and brought the Islamic Republic to power. All efforts to improve the relationship have foundered. A rapprochement may seem highly unlikely at present when Washington and Tehran are so sharply divided, especially over the Iranian nuclear program. Yet, despite these differences, recent conversations that I had in Iran indicate to me that enough common interests have emerged to finally make rapprochement possible between Washington and Tehran. Let me explain.

I was invited to give lectures both on revolution and on Russian-Iranian relations in Iran in May 2005 by Abbas Maleki, director of the International Institute for Caspian Studies. I had met Dr. Maleki in Tehran in March 1992 (my only previous visit to Iran), when I participated in a conference held by the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) on “The Transformation of the Former USSR and its Implications for the Third World.” Maleki, one of the keynote speakers at the conference, was then deputy foreign minister for research and training.

In the years since then, we have had occasional contact. I sent him a copy of my book *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* shortly after its publication in 1997. In 2003, we corresponded about readings on revolution since we were both teaching classes on the subject. Then, in early 2005, he invited me to lecture in Iran. I instantly agreed.

I arrived in Tehran late at night on Sunday, May 15, and departed early in the morning on Thursday, May 19. In the three intervening days, I had a very full schedule. On Monday, May 16, Maleki held a lunch for me at the Caspian Institute that was also attended by four others (two editors, an official and another scholar). That evening, I gave a lecture at the Caspian Institute on “Is Revolution Predictable?” to an audience that included Iranian Foreign Ministry officials, military officers, journalists, scholars, foreign embassy representatives, oil company officials and graduate students.

On Tuesday, May 17, I gave lectures on “Iranian-Russian Relations,” first at the Center for Strategic Research (an organization formally headed by Hashemi Rafsanjani and linked to the Expediency Council), and then again at the Institute for

Political and International Studies (which is linked to the Foreign Ministry). Later that afternoon, I was interviewed on a variety of topics in a seminar-like setting by five editors and journalists from *Hamshahri*.

On Wednesday, May 18, I went to the holy city of Qom (along with a Foreign Ministry interpreter, the Caspian Institute's administrative officer and a driver), where I gave a lecture on "Iran, Islamic Revolution, and World Order" to a clerical audience. There are several separate universities in Qom, but there are also some institutions they all share in common. I gave my lecture at one of the latter: the Center for Text Collections, which is under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Supreme Leader and the Supreme Leader's representative to the Universities of Qom. Later back in Tehran, I talked about my visit to Iran in Dr. Maleki's graduate course on Iranian foreign policy which he offers through the English-language M.A. program in Contemporary Iranian Studies at the Foreign Ministry's International Relations University.

Q&A sessions were held after each of my lectures. These tended to cover many of the same subjects, including Iranian-American relations. Rather than give an account of the conversation upon each of these occasions (which would be highly repetitive), I will give here composite accounts of the views I heard Iranians express on several subjects, including their hopes and fears regarding the Bush administration; the recent wave of democratic revolutions and their implications for Iran; the nuclear issue; the Arab-Israeli conflict; the situation in Iraq; the rise of Sunni fundamentalism and its impact on Iran; Iranian views of Russia and Europe; and the prospects for an Iranian-American rapprochement.

BUSH ADMINISTRATION: HOPES AND FEARS

Although they were often critical of it, many Iranians I met expressed admiration for President Bush and key aspects of his foreign policy. They greatly appreciated the president's description of Islam as a religion of peace in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. They admired President Bush himself for his religiosity. They approved of how America ousted the Taliban, whom Iranian clerics regard as uneducated fanatics who know nothing about Islam. They also appreciated how America got rid of the brutal Saddam Hussein and held elections in Iraq that have given the majority Shia population there the chance to rule after being suppressed by Saddam Hussein and previous rulers of Iraq.

On the other hand, those I spoke with expressed much bitterness over President Bush's inclusion of Iran along with Iraq and North Korea in the "axis of evil." They very much agreed with Bush that Saddam Hussein was evil, as his brutal treatment of Iraqi Shias and his invasions of Iran and Kuwait demonstrated. They also agreed with Bush that Kim Jong Il is a horrible despot and a danger to neighboring countries. One analyst expressed the fear that North Korean nuclear weapons might be targeted against Iran. But they insisted that, whatever its faults, Iran is a "civilized" country and that the Islamic Republic is not at all like these two other regimes. They could not believe that the Bush administration does not recognize this. Indeed, they believed it actually does recognize this, and so its designation of Iran as part of the axis of evil demonstrates an intention to bring about "regime change" in Tehran.

Some Iranians professed to see the Bush administration as a revolutionary regime actively seeking to export its brand of revolution to other countries. They expected that the Bush administration will discover, as Iran did, that exporting revolution to others is fraught with difficulty, and that Bush or his successor will eventually stop trying to do this. Iranians also feel powerless to influence the Bush administration's foreign policy.

This criticism of the Bush administration, though, needs to be put into perspective. I heard far more criticism of previous American presidents' policies toward Iran than of the Bush administration's. Bitterness over the American role in the 1953 ouster of Dr. Mohamed Mossadeq remains strong. My statement that Iranian involvement in this episode was as great as or even greater than that of the United States was greeted with incredulity and even derision. Dr. Maleki himself asked why the United States had reacted so negatively to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran but not to the 1978 Marxist one in Afghanistan. The Iranians seem to have a sense that they have been singled out for especially hostile treatment by the United States for decades. When I pointed out that Americans are still bitter over the 1979 seizure of the American embassy and the subsequent hostage crisis, I was told that this should be understood as a natural reaction to previous American hostility toward Iran and that Americans had suffered far less at the hands of Iranians than vice versa. Iranians seem to want Americans, including the U.S. government, to acknowledge their view of history as the truth.

DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN

It is the recent wave of democratic revolutions in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere that appears to frighten Iranian officials far more than the presence of American troops in Iran's neighbors Iraq and Afghanistan. Many Iranians see the United States as having been the cause of the democratic revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the movement leading to the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Many Iranians I spoke to fear (while some hope) that America will attempt to organize a democratic revolution in Iran.

I tried to explain that America did not engineer these democratic revolutions. Washington does not have the power to order hundreds of thousands of people to go out onto the streets and demonstrate. My Iranian interlocutors, though, seemed quite skeptical about this. Some noted President Bush's speech calling for democratization in the Middle East as heralding an active American effort to bring this about. Others expressed bewilderment at why the Bush administration would want to do this: while democratization resulted in pro-American governments in the former USSR, it will surely lead to the rise of anti-American ones in the Arab world. I was sternly warned that any American efforts to "impose" democracy on Iran would backfire. I think, though, the idea that the impetus for democratic revolution was mainly internal was more frightening than reassuring; for this implies that a bargain cannot be reached with the United States to prevent it.

THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

The nuclear issue is understood very differently in Tehran than in Washington. America and others fear that Iran intends to use the atomic reactor Russia is building for it to acquire spent uranium in order to fabricate nuclear weapons, and that it would give nuclear weapons to opponents of Israel such as Hizbollah and Hamas. Iranians, by contrast, see American opposition to their nuclear program as basically unfair. The United States acquiesced to India's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Washington has also acquiesced to Pakistan's acquisition of them — something that really upsets Iranians since they see the Musharraf government as highly unstable and susceptible to overthrow by Sunni Islamic fanatics. Washington has also, from Tehran's perspective, been very careful to avoid conflict with a nuclear-armed North Korea. So why, they ask, are American officials talking about a possible U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran, which does not yet have nuclear weapons, when it deals so carefully with states that do have them?

Iranians argue that the Non-Proliferation Treaty allows signatories the right to acquire atomic energy, and so it is unfair to prevent Iran from operating the nuclear power plant Russia is building for it. Some claim that Iran has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons, while others think that it should. The latter, though, cannot understand why Washington is acting as if a nuclear Iran would be more dangerous than a nuclear Pakistan or North Korea. Iran, they say, would not attack Israel with nuclear weapons since it knows that Israel and/or the United States would retaliate. Iran, they say, wants nuclear weapons in order to deter a nuclear attack.

When I mentioned American concern that Iran might provide nuclear weapons to Hizbollah and Hamas, my Iranian colleagues just laughed. They know full well that they could not control these two groups, and that Iran would be blamed if either attacked Israel with nuclear weapons.

THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

The Iranian position on the Arab-Israeli conflict is understood very differently in Tehran than in Washington. The United States and Israel are concerned about Iran's vocal opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, for this implies that Tehran doesn't want compromise but seeks Israel's destruction instead. The Iranians, though, claim that their leaders — including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei — have made statements indicating that Tehran will accept any agreement that the Palestinians themselves will accept. Why, Iranian scholars asked me, doesn't the United States recognize this? And why doesn't Washington understand that Iranian statements criticizing the peace process have nothing to do with Iranian policy toward the Arab-Israeli situation and everything to do with the Islamic republic's desire to avoid being denounced as un-Islamic by al-Qaeda and other Sunni Islamic fanatics?

IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

As mentioned earlier, the Iranians I spoke with expressed appreciation for the Bush administration's policies toward these two countries. Indeed, Iranians see themselves as being on the same side as the Americans in these two countries: supporters of moderate elected governments against Sunni fanatics (religious in Afghanistan, and both secular and religious in Iraq)

seeking to regain power by force. There have also been many instances in which Iran has helped the United States in both of these countries. In fact, many claim, America and Iran are *de facto* allies in these two countries. But while Tehran recognizes this, Washington does not. The Iranians I spoke with seemed especially impatient for the U.S. government to publicly acknowledge how much help it is getting from Iran in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iranians, though, are pessimistic about the long-term prospects for pacifying Afghanistan. Iranians seem to see Afghans as an uncivilized, even barbaric, people who are always fighting. They noted the violent anti-American reaction in Afghanistan to news reports of American troops desecrating copies of the Quran in Guantanamo despite the fact that America had liberated

Afghanistan from the Taliban. (They also noted that there was no such violent reaction to this story in Iran.)

Iranians are also pessimistic about Iraq, but for a different reason.

They believe that if the Sunni opposition is to be defeated, Iraqi Shias are going to have to join the armed forces in much larger numbers than they have. This, however, is something that could happen.

The Iranians I spoke with expressed amazement at how deferential the Americans have been toward Ayatollah Sistani, the top Shia cleric in Iraq. This, in fact, was even the source of some resentment: If Americans can be polite to Iraqi ayatollahs, why can't they be toward Iranian

ones? In response to the argument that Sistani seems to be far more democratically inclined than the Iranian ayatollahs, one scholar noted that Sistani is likely to invoke for himself the principle of *velayat-e faqih* — which allows Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei to nullify the decisions of elected leaders.

There was a general sense that things could only go well in both Iraq and Afghanistan if America and Iran cooperated with each other regarding them. My Iranian interlocutors claimed that Tehran was willing to do so but Washington was not.

THE RISE OF SUNNI FUNDAMENTALISM

The rise of Sunni fundamentalism — *salafism*, or Sunni fanaticism, as my

interlocutors prefer to call it — is especially worrisome to Iran.

Iranians understand full well that Sunni fanatics are as anti-Shia as they are anti-Western. Should Sunni fundamental-

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ist regimes rise to power in the immediate vicinity of Iran, Iranians I spoke with believe that they will pose a serious threat to Iran, just as the Taliban regime did. Indeed, they do not even have to come to power to pose a threat.

Iranians see Sunni fundamentalists as a common threat to both Iran and the United States. But instead of working with Iran against this common threat, my Iranian interlocutors see the United States as stubbornly and persistently working with

Sunni regimes — especially Saudi Arabia and Pakistan — which support the Sunni fundamentalists. The clerical audience I addressed in Qom objected strongly to applying the term “fundamentalist” to them at all. Iranian Shias, they insisted, are tolerant and progressive. But while Washington refuses to work with Iranian Shias who speak their minds, it foolishly works with Sunni regimes that duplicitously support Sunni fundamentalists actively working against American interests. Why does America do this? A few saw Israel and the Jewish lobby as somehow being responsible, but most seemed to think that this was the result of willful American ignorance about Iran and the Muslim world generally. They believe that the longer America foolishly persists in working with Sunni regimes that support Sunni fundamentalists, the worse things will get both for America and Iran. Indeed, this is actually worse for Iran: America can leave the Middle East, but Iran cannot.

RUSSIA AND EUROPE

In my presentations on Russian-Iranian relations at the Center for Strategic Research and at IPIS, I argued that, while Russia and Iran have certain converging interests (including a desire to limit American and Turkish influence in the region, opposition to secession, dislike for the American-sponsored Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which bypasses both Russia and Iran, and a desire for Russia to continue building nuclear power plants for Iran), Moscow and Tehran also have important diverging interests (including different views on how to divide the Caspian Sea, competing views on how Caspian Basin oil should be exported, differences on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and wariness over

each other’s current or prospective relationship with the United States). Although each side valued the relationship with the other, Iranian-Russian ties did not seem to be very close; neither was willing to give up pursuing policies the other disapproved of for the sake of the other.

On both occasions, the audience indicated that my views on Iranian-Russian relations were, if anything, too optimistic. Russia was viewed by them in decidedly negative terms. Although the Iranian government has expressed understanding for Putin’s policy toward Chechnya and does not support independence for Chechens, even though they are fellow Muslims, Iranian scholars are appalled by how Moscow has treated the Chechens and the Muslims of Russia generally. They also expressed disappointment that Putin turned down the request recently made by Uzbek oppositionists for Moscow to mediate between them and the Karimov regime. Putin’s policies vis-à-vis the Muslims of the former USSR may provoke opposition activity among them that Moscow will not be able to control. And for all Moscow’s professions of friendship toward Tehran, the Iranians I spoke with have no expectation that Russia would help them if they ever seriously needed it.

Iranian views of Europe were somewhat more positive. Europe is an important trade partner. Until recently, Britain, France and Germany have helped shield Iran from the United States on the nuclear issue. Lately, however, these three have appeared less willing to do so, thereby reducing their value to Tehran. The non-interventionist foreign policy that Europeans seem so proud of has led many Iranians to conclude that Europe would do nothing to help Tehran in a crisis. Pri-

vately, several Iranians expressed dismay at European criticism of American intervention in Iraq as this only demonstrates that, unlike the Bush administration, Europeans would have been content to allow the Iraqi Shia majority to remain suppressed indefinitely by Saddam Hussein and his sons.

PROSPECTS FOR AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN RAPPROCHEMENT

Despite all its differences with the United States, the Iranians I met with seem to regard America as the one country that could protect Iran from Sunni fundamentalists and other opponents — if only it would. My Iranian interlocutors seemed to long for an Iranian-American rapprochement, but recognized that this would be difficult to achieve both because of the important differences between the two countries (especially over the nuclear issue) and because powerful forces on both sides oppose a rapprochement. Pride and the burden of history also play a role in preventing the Iranian-American relationship from moving forward.

I had a sense that many saw an Iranian-American rapprochement as too difficult to achieve, and that Iran would become isolated in an increasingly hostile Sunni neighborhood with no one from the outside willing to help it. Others, though, observed that Chinese-American relations quickly went from hostile to friendly as a result of the common Soviet threat to both even though important differences between Washington and Beijing remained unresolved. They note how after decades of extremely hostile Sino-American relations, President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing electrified the world and led to a dramatic improvement in the relationship.

Many Iranians I met with seemed to hope that Iranian-American relations might improve in a similar manner. While they certainly don't foresee President Bush visiting Iran any time soon, many saw a visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as having an impact similar to Nixon's visit to China.

I talked about this idea with several people, usually in a group setting. Everyone seemed to think it was desirable. While some thought that the United States should have to meet certain unspecified conditions before Secretary Rice was allowed to visit, others thought that there should be no conditions, as such a visit could create the conditions to ameliorate, if not resolve, outstanding Iranian-American differences. All seemed enchanted by the idea of such a visit. It is something that would certainly gratify Iranian sensibilities about the seriousness with which Washington should treat them.

Everyone seemed to recognize, though, that nothing like this could happen without some preliminary steps occurring first. One individual suggested that the new Iranian president meet with President Bush at the opening of the UN General Assembly session in September. Depending on how things went, perhaps Bush could invite him to come back with him briefly to either Washington or the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas.

On a more mundane level, several Iranians expressed the hope that Iranian-American relations could be improved if there were more academic, cultural and other exchanges between the two countries. The Iranians pointed out that they are doing what they can to promote exchanges. The Caspian Institute invites several Americans to Iran every year, as

do other Iranian institutions. But America, they complained, makes it very difficult for Iranian scholars to visit the United States. It would be especially important, several of them said, for Washington to allow Iranian conservatives — including clerics — to visit the United States. For, the more familiar the conservatives became with the United States, the more likely they would be to countenance improved relations.

The overwhelming impression that I had from my conversations in Iran is that elites there are not hostile toward the United States but instead feel something akin to unrequited love. They very much want to have better relations with the United States. But they want America to court Iran and not vice versa. This may seem annoying to many Americans, but what struck me is that Iranian conservatives are very willing to be courted. Even a little effort in this regard might lead to a greater willingness on their part to work with Washington. But even if it does not, Washington and Tehran would each benefit from the more accurate image of the other that would result from greater contact.

AFTERWORD

As this article goes to press in November 2005, the prospects for an Iranian-American rapprochement have deteriorated even further. The hard-line mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected president (something none of my Iranian interlocutors predicted back in May). Further, he has made a number of hostile statements about both America and

Israel (including the desire to see Israel “wiped off the face of the map”) that clearly signal no desire on his part for a rapprochement with the United States. Not just Washington, but other Western governments have responded negatively to this provocative verbal salvo.

Ahmadinejad’s reprehensible statements about Israel have damaged Iran’s image abroad. It seems to me, though, that they do not represent increased Iranian hostility toward the Jewish state, but rather an effort to prevent rapprochement with the United States as well as to undercut both Iranian moderates and those conservative clerics such as Rafsanjani who might be willing to engage in such a rapprochement. If these were indeed his goals, he certainly achieved them — at least for now.

Despite this, I think that the logic of the Iranians I spoke to this past May still holds: The common threat from Sunni fundamentalism that Washington and Tehran both face provides an important incentive for joint Iranian-American cooperation against it. The mutual recognition of this logic in both Washington and Tehran that must precede an Iranian-American rapprochement, though, is clearly not imminent. During the Cold War, it took several years for Washington and Beijing to recognize that it was possible for them to cooperate against the common Soviet threat. The situation we both face may have to get worse before America and Iran recognize not just the opportunity, but the necessity, for rapprochement.