

Khatemi's Dialogue with America, Not with Washington

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Jan 8, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

Iranian President Mohammad Khatemi's January 7 interview on CNN was long on history but short on policy indicatives. The most striking aspect of was that he gave it, not what he said. Khatemi is staking his prestige on foreign policy, which is surprising from a man whose entire career and whose election campaign were about domestic issues.

Washington's Success. Some have argued that Khatemi's initiative shows that the U.S. policy of containment is falling apart. Quite the contrary, Iran's possible interest in dialogue is a sign of the success of containment: Iran is realizing the price it has paid for its self-imposed estrangement from the United States.

The Clinton administration's justification for sanctions was that they would lead Iran to change its policies by showing Iran how costly is its unacceptable behavior. That was a demanding goal for sanctions, which have often been ineffective at inducing governments to change their ways. The jury is still out on whether the sanctions have achieved this much change. But the Khatemi actions show that the sanctions are causing second thoughts among Iranians about the price they have to pay for their aggressive behavior. The ferment in Iran about policy towards the West is a product of the pressure created by sanctions. Since the sanctions may have started to have the desired effect on Tehran, it would seem appropriate to keep up the pressure.

Old Wine in New Bottles. As of yet, Khatemi seems more interested in appearing to change policy than in actually changing it. When pressed about the matters that Washington cares most about, Khatemi repeated the usual Iranian hardline:

- On the Middle East peace process, he argued "certain foreign policy decisions of the U.S. are made in Tel Aviv and not in Washington," and he described Israel as a "racist terrorist regime." He added, "Zionists constitute a small portion of the Jewish people."
- On terrorism, he repeated the long-standing Iranian justification, "supporting peoples who fight for the liberation of their land is not, in my opinion, supporting terrorism." Iran provides millions of dollars annually and substantial weaponry to Hezbollah. One can dispute whether its activities in Lebanon itself are terrorist, but Hezbollah would-be suicide bombers were intercepted en route to Israel three times in December-months after Khatemi took office. That makes a mockery of Khatemi's claim Iran would never be involved in "the slaughter of

innocent human beings." And Salman Rushdie might be skeptical of Khatemi's statement, "how could such a religion [as Islam], and those who claim to be its followers, get involved in the assassination of innocent individuals."

- On weapons of mass destruction, he flatly denied Iran has a nuclear weapons program, despite the repeated incidents in which Iranian operatives have sought equipment useful primarily if not only for making nuclear weapons.

Khatemi dwelt on the history of U.S.-Iranian discord, rather than saying that Washington and Tehran should let the past behind them. He never acknowledged any errors on Iran's part. When asked if the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran had been a "revolutionary excess," he responded, "I do know that the feelings of the great American people have been hurt, and of course I regret it." That is like saying, "I am sorry you did not like what I did." He added an analogy-"the American people never blamed the Vietnamese people, but rather blamed their own politicians for dragging their country and its youth into the Vietnam quagmire"-implying Americans should blame their government, rather than Iran's, for the hostage-taking.

Khatemi offered no hint of willingness to compromise on any issue. At no point in the fifty-minute interview did he suggest that Iran might be willing to alter its positions. He went out of his way to say Iran's stance was not open to change, arguing, "It is the right of every nation to stand on its principles and values."

Khatemi the Political Philosopher. Khatemi's talk reflected his interest in abstract political philosophy. He discussed Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which he said "I am sure most Americans have read." His rather pedantic, lecture on American history suggested that Khatemi's ideal society is seventeenth century Puritan New England, complete with witchcraft trials and persecution of those who disagree with the government-dictated views.

Khatemi's long discourse on political philosophy seems designed more for an Iranian audience than for an American one. He lauded "the Anglo-American approach to religion [for] rel[ying] on the principle that religion and liberty are consistent and compatible." He repeated this theme, arguing, "one of the greatest tragedies in human history is this confrontation between religion and liberty." As ordinary Iranians know full well, it is not the United States which faces a confrontation between religion and liberty: it is Iran. Khatemi's words were daggers directed against the Iranian hardliners who would use religion as an excuse to stamp out liberty in Iran.

Policy Options for Washington. The long-standing U.S. policy is to welcome dialogue with officially authorized representatives of the Iranian government. The barrier to dialogue has been Tehran, which is the only government in the world that refuses to talk to Washington. Khatemi expressed no interest in such dialogue. Nevertheless, his comments over the last month suggest that some in Iran are realizing the high price Iran pays for its hard line. It is possible that, thanks to sanctions, the United States will be successful in inducing Iran to agree to a dialogue.

Were dialogue between the U.S. and Iranian governments to start, expectations should be kept modest. The United States has had intense and high-level dialogue with Castro's Cuba for twenty years, while during that time, the two countries have not reached agreement on many issues and the U.S. sanctions on Cuba have grown tougher.

Dialogue is one issue; sanctions are another. Dialogue need not imply a change in sanctions policy. The long-standing U.S. criteria for a change in sanctions policy has been that the United States must see some improvement in Iranian behavior, not simply in Iranian statements. At most, dialogue would provide an opportunity to explore with Iran what might constitute a road map for its return to the world community of nations.

To break the stranglehold of radical anti-Western Islamism, engagement with the Iranian people is more important than dialogue with the Iranian government. Khatemi's call for "exchange of professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists, and tourists" is to be welcomed. It will be interesting to see if Khatemi can deliver: Revolutionary Guards and other revolutionary stalwarts whom he does not fully control have in the past been the ones who blocked visas

for Americans. The U.S. sanctions do not prevent visits to the United States by Iranians. Still, the United States could respond to Khatemi's words by taking actions to facilitate visa procedures for Iranian intellectuals and tourists- although of course the visa procedures will remain cumbersome so long as Tehran refuses to allow the issuance of U.S. visas in Iran. Also, the United States could move more quickly to increase Iranians' access to information by starting up Radio Free Iran, for which \$4 million in funding was approved in November.

Patrick Clawson is director for research at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #293

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

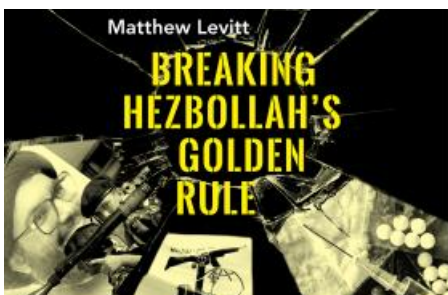
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)