Prospects for Dialogue with Iran:

Implications for U.S. Policy

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Brief Analysis

When Mohammed Khatemi was unexpectedly elected president in May 1997, he was called in Iran "Ayatollah Gorbachev," in the expectation the system could fall apart if it opened up. While it is too early too ascertain whether Khatemi's welcome rhetoric is matched by substantive changes in Iranian behavior, his recent speeches suggest he may at least be "Ayatollah Brezhnev," with whom it would be possible to combine some measure of detente along withcontinued containment.

What Are Khatemi's Intentions? Khatemi has been clever to restate long-standing Iranian foreign policy positions in a way that looks very different. While he said "I hope in the close future I could have a dialogue and talk with the people of America," he has not offered to talk directly with the U.S. government, which would constitute a significant change in Iran's policy. Similarly, Khatemi has showed no signs of a change in position on the key issues of concern to the United States, i.e., weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the peace process. In the same press conference where he spoke positively about dialogue with the American people, he said, "We have opposed the peace process and we still do. [Israel] is a racist, terrorist, and expansionist regime . . . We hope that the roots of problems in the region and the world will be destroyed." Khatemi's focus has been on dialogue: at his speech to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) summit, he advocated dialogue among civilizations, and at this press conference, he expressed a hope for eventual dialogue with the American people. This phraseology cleverly gives a foreign policy component to Khatemi's major theme about a more open society under the rule of law. Because he has only called for dialogue rather than for a change in the policies Iran advocates, he can more readily deflect criticism he may get from hardliners within the Iranian regime.

That said, it is surprising to see how actively Khatemi has spoken out on foreign policy in the last week. His entire career has centered on the cultural and lifestyle issues that he put at the heart of his election campaign. He is a moderate on the issues of teens listening to Western music, men wearing blue jeans, and women sporting lipstick in public. These are the issues that most directly concern ordinary Iranians, who are not particularly interested in foreign affairs. Khatemi is facing considerable opposition to reforming social policy, and he may well concentrate his effort on these domestic matters, despite his recent flirtations with foreign policy.

How Strong Is Khatemi? What are the chances Khatemi could successfully reorient Iran's foreign policy, if indeed his objective was more than simply a clever re-packaging of existing policies? Since assuming office in August, Khatemi's main public role has been symbolic. What was so surprising about Khatemi's OIC speech was how much it put him in the highlight. The nickname he has acquired in north Tehran is "Prince Diana," because he is seen opening hospitals and greeting school children, while substantive matters are addressed by others. The more charitable interpretation is that Khatemi is self-effacing but exercises real power over social and cultural policy, while ex-president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani runs economic policy from his post as head of the Expediency Council and supreme religious guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continues to control foreign policy, as he has done for eight years.

If Khatemi wants to hold dialogue with the United States-much less change any of Iran's unacceptable behavior-then the main opposition will come from the political clergy headed by Khamenei. After Khatemi crushedtheir candidate in the May presidential election, the hardline clergy were in shock, offering little resistance. But they regrouped, as became clear last month when Iran faced a crisis over the role of the supreme guide that the BBC World Service called "most serious challenge facing the Islamic Republic since its creation." Khamenei's credentials as a religious leader are openly belittled, both by the population and by the most respected senior clerics. Therefore, the constitution was revised to separate the role of political religious leader (rahbar) from that of source of emulation (marja-i taqlid), the traditional title for the most senior Shia cleric. The gap between his political and religious power makes Khamenei vulnerable. Last month, Ayatollah Azeri-Qomi- until recently the editor of the newspaper most reflective of clerical opinion (Resalaat)-called for trimming Khamenei's power by giving significant authority to Ayatollah Montazeri, a highly respected cleric who had been the chosen successor of regime founder Ayatollah Khomeini until the latter dumped him weeks before his death in 1989. In a major address in Qom on November 14, Montazeri bluntly called for limiting Khamenei's power and reducing the clerical role in the government. In response, the regime engineered massive public protests to isolate these critics, but they had to pull their punches to prevent the dispute from spoiling the Tehran summit.

Will Khamenei resume the fight now that the summit is over? If so, he might target Khatemi's call for dialogue with Westerners. In his own OIC speech, Khamenei complained that "Western materialistic civilization is directing everyone towards materialism while money, gluttony, and carnal desires are made the greatest aspirations." That does not sound like a civilization which has much to offer Iran in terms of dialogue.

Implications for U.S. Policy: America has a stake in the outcome of the political maneuverings in Iran. It is clear that U.S. interests would be advanced by an Iran that modifies its unacceptable behavior, but the best way to encourage a more positive result is not so clear. To the extent that Washington perseveres in exacting a heavy price from Iran for its "rogue" policies, that strengthens the hand of those Iranians who argue that Tehran's current approach is too costly and must be changed. Specifically, if the imposition of tough U.S. sanctions against Total for investing in the South Pars gas deal succeeds in further impeding foreign investment in Iranian oil and gas development, that is a weighty argument moderates could use about why Iranian policy must change. At the same time, to the extent that the United States shows its willingness to respond meaningfully in the event of a significant Iranian policy change, that could strengthen the hand of those arguing that a new policy would be more profitable. In theory, the ideal is to combine the two-to wield the stick while proffering the carrot if policies change. In practice, that can often sound like inconsistent wavering.

Perhaps the most realistic assessment is that Washington is unlikely to have much influence over the outcome of political debates in Iran. That said, it would be inappropriate to assume that Iran will always have a revolutionary regime, which is the implication of past U.S. statements accepting the Islamic Republic as a permanent feature on the regional landscape. Indeed, the policy of containment makes sense only because the United States expects Iran's revolutionary regime eventually to give way to a more normal state. Given the demonstrated inability of this regime

to meet its people's economic or cultural needs, as well as the fact that 70 percent of the electorate voted against the regime's preferred presidential candidate last May, the chances of regime change are growing, not weakening.

While the Islamic Republic is in power, maintaining and pursuing the long-standing offer of dialogue is in U.S. interests. Dialogue offers a way to reduce misunderstandings that could cause crises, and it provides an avenue to explore whether Iran would be willing to agree to confidence-building measures, e.g., abandoning in toto its civilian nuclear power program if the United States encourages investment in lower cost sources of electric power for Iran. It would be naive, however, to expect that a "civilizational dialogue" will resolve all outstanding problems; consider that U.S. dialogue with problematic regimes like those in Cuba and North Korea have hardly led to good relations. In the meantime, any dialogue with Iran will have to be combined with continued efforts to contain Iran's unacceptable behavior and to deter Iranian aggression, which means maintaining the U.S. sanctions on Iran until there is clear evidence Iran has changed the behavior that made the sanctions necessary.

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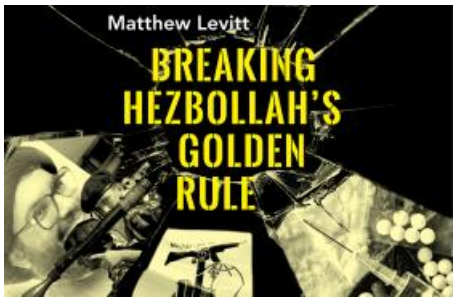

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