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# Khatemi, the Search for Iranian 'Moderates,' and U.S. Policy

by [Patrick Clawson](#)

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### Brief Analysis

In banner headlines, newspapers across America heralded the surprise victor in Iran's May 23 presidential election - Mohammad Khatemi - as a moderate. This, in fact, marks at least the fourth attempt by the United States to find influential moderates among Iran's leadership since the revolution. In 1980, the Islamic Republic's first president, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, was thought to be a moderate who would solve the hostage crisis; he turned out to be powerless. In 1985, the Iran-Contra affair began with a CIA effort to reinforce Iranian moderates who opposed Soviet ambitions. Only later did it emerge that the U.S.' interlocutors were lying, saying whatever would persuade Washington to sell them arms. In 1989, when Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected president, he was described as the "great white-turbaned hope," yet he sponsored more terrorism than did his predecessors.

In terms of his approach to foreign policy, the search for moderation in President-elect Khatemi is likely to also be in vain. Actually, Khatemi campaigned with the vigorous support of long-time radical allies like Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, who as ambassador in Damascus organized the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing that killed 241 U.S. servicemen. Mohtashemi exulted in Khatemi's victory, saying it signaled positive changes. What little Khatemi said during the campaign about foreign affairs was to reaffirm the Islamic Republic's policies, such as opposition to U.S. presence in the Gulf. At the press conference after his victory, he emphasized continuity in Iranian foreign policy, e.g., the rejection of the legitimacy of Israel, which he called a racist state.

Between Radicals and Technocrats: Importantly, Khatemi was not the first choice of those usually thought of as Iran's moderates, i.e., the technocrats grouped around current President Rafsanjani. Eventually, the technocrats did support him, but only reluctantly and in a temporary alliance with the radicals. That is because both knew that neither could win alone. The technocratic and radical leaders explained that they cooperated to oppose "monopolism" by the clergy-bazaar traditionalists who dominate Iranian politics. The alliance of technocrats and radicals is actually not so strange. Both are modernists with roots in Western politics, colored lightly by Islamic rhetoric. Liberalism and neo-Marxist radicalism are both products of the Enlightenment, which Iran's traditionalists

reject. A smart campaigner, Khatemi focused on lifestyle restrictions, the one issue on which he is definitely a moderate. He said people should be free to listen to Western-style music in their homes if they kept the volume low enough not to disturb others, without worrying whether vigilantes would barge in. This resonated with Iranians, who are sick of the Islamic Republic's draconian restrictions. The issue that brought a 91 percent turnout (compared to 63 percent four years ago) was not foreign policy: it was whether women could wear lipstick and men wear blue jeans. Also, Khatemi reached out to ordinary Iranians, campaigning mostly in the provinces, unlike the technocrats whose attention is exclusively on Tehran (the Iranian equivalent of ignoring life outside the Beltway). The result was a true landslide: Khatemi received 20.9 million votes, compared to 10.6 million for the 1993 winner, Rafsanjani.

From Rafsanjani to Khatemi: Khatemi's moderate stance on lifestyle issues does not make him a moderate on the issues that President Clinton characterized on May 29 as the three big hurdles to U.S.-Iran reconciliation: terrorism, the peace process, and weapons of mass destruction. In his public life, Khatemi has never shown an interest in these issues. He will face vigorous opposition to his changes in lifestyle policy from a dedicated minority well represented in the Majlis, and that is likely to keep him busy. In any case, he has limited authority over foreign policy, which has become largely the domain of the supreme leader (Khomeini's successor), Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Khatemi's approach seems to be the same as Rafsanjani's: liberalism on one issue, while continuing the hardline stance on the questions that concern the United States. Under Rafsanjani, the liberalism was on economics. When elected in 1989, Rafsanjani was called a moderate because of his support for economic liberalization. In the end, it was clear he was eager to attract Western capital but without abandoning Iranian terrorism, weapons of mass destruction programs, or destabilization of moderate neighbors. Some commentators who are still amazed to find that Iran wants to do business with the United States overlook the inconvenient fact that Iran's strategy is to use the resources it gains from this business to fund armaments, instability, and terror at least as much as to improve its people's well-being. During his first presidential term from 1989 to 1993, Rafsanjani borrowed \$30 billion from Western businessmen. It was during this period, as a German court recently ruled, Iranian assassins killed four Iranian dissidents in 1992 in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. The Mykonos evidence showed that leading Iranian moderates - President Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati - personally approved every terrorist operation, as members of the "Special Operations Committee." That demolished the excuse that the moderates were not directly connected to terrorism and that their hands were tied by anti-Western Majlis members and the Supreme Leader. However, the same excuses may be made for Khatemi. Indeed, he may launch a charm offensive to persuade Europeans that his government is entirely different from Rafsanjani's, while covering up the radical credentials of his advisors. The Islamic Republic has been expert at the dual-track foreign policy of speaking sweetly while continuing to pursue outlaw behavior.

Over time, Khatemi's lifestyle policies may herald a change in the Islamic Republic. Khatemi's intention is to strengthen the Islamist regime by winning the hearts and minds of young people. He wants cultural products that package Islamist values attractively, using Western techniques and appealing to Iranian nationalism. That is why he, as culture minister, sponsored provocative Iranian films and tolerated Iranian romance novels (suitably chaste and immensely popular). If Khatemi succeeds, the Islamic Republic will be rejuvenated. However, it is quite possible that he will turn out to be "Ayatollah Gorbachev": a man who introduces reforms he thinks will strengthen the system but which in fact lead to demands for broader reforms and the eventual disintegration of the old order.

Implications for U.S. Policy: Despite U.S. differences with Iran, there are still many reasons to talk to Tehran. The barrier to such talks, overlooked by many critics of U.S. policy, is that Iranian leaders continually repeat their own rejection of any talks with Washington. Maybe Tehran could change its mind. Khatemi made something of a stir when he said that Iran cannot talk to the U.S. now, rather than the usual formula that Iran could never under any circumstances hold such a dialogue. Once Khatemi takes office on August 1, it is worth having others approach him to ask if he wants to deal. Indeed, Washington could offer to put something on the table, such as an agreement to end

all litigation between the two governments, freeing up \$1 billion-\$2 billion in frozen Iranian assets from pre-payments for weapons not delivered after the 1979 revolution. If Khatemi does not agree, or if he refuses to offer up a return gesture (like canceling the Bushehr nuclear power plant in exchange for U.S. non-objection to Japan resuming its suspended \$1.8 billion loan for a hydroelectric dam), then it will be clear he is not now interested in moderation on foreign policy and security issues.

> One factor that might lead Iran to accept an offer for talks would be to deflect attention from the investigation of the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 American servicemen. Evidence from the suspect soon to be deported from Canada may link Tehran to that bomb, in the same way that Iran was tied to the Mykonos murders. If Tehran were found responsible, then the United States will have little choice but to respond vigorously. To do otherwise would sow doubts about the credibility of U.S. resolve in the Gulf - credibility, hard won during the Gulf War, which sustains the peace there by deterring aggressors.

Conclusion: The main lesson from the Iranian presidential elections is not about moderates - it is that the Islamic Republic is profoundly unpopular, especially with the young. If Washington can block Iranian external aggression, then Iran's manifold internal problems will eventually cause the Islamic Republic to fall apart. That is called containment, and it is the basis for current U.S. policy towards Iran. This election shows that U.S. policy has excellent prospects for success.

Patrick Clawson, an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute, is a senior research professor at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies and author of U.S. Sanctions on Iran (Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 1997). The views expressed here are his own and not those of the U.S. government or any of its agencies.

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