

Iran Can't Agree to a Damn Thing

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At the moment, the Islamic Republic is just too dysfunctional to cut a nuclear deal.

During the chaotic days of Iran's Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country's emerging "supreme leader," assured Iranians that their supposed oppressor, the United States, would not be able to put the hated shah back on his throne. "America can't do a damn thing against us," he inveighed, a winning line that became the uprising's unofficial slogan. It's a catchphrase Iran has deployed time and again since, most recently in a taunting billboard along the Iran-Iraq border and in a banner hung in front of a captured American drone (though hilariously, in the latter case, the hapless banner-makers mistranslated the phrase as "America Can Do No Wrong").

Khomeini's slogan was true enough at the time: There wasn't much U.S. President Jimmy Carter could do to intervene in one of the most stunning uprisings in history. But today, when it comes to Iran's endless nuclear impasse with the West, one might turn the phrase back on the Iranians: The problem, in a nutshell, is that Iran can't agree to a damn thing.

Indeed, the slow pace of nuclear negotiations with Iran are only the beginning of the reasons to be discouraged about resolution of the standoff. More worrying is that political infighting in Tehran is so bad that Iran might not be able to bring itself to accept unilateral U.S. unconditional surrender were it to be offered.

To be sure, eight months between negotiating sessions -- June 18-19, 2012 in Moscow, followed by the upcoming session slated for Feb. 26 in Almaty, Kazakhstan -- is bad news enough. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon hit the nail on the head when he warned last week, "We should not give much more time to the Iranians, and we should not waste time. We have seen what happened with [North Korea]. It ended up that they [were] secretly, quietly, without any obligations, without any pressure, making progress" on nuclear weapons.

But the pace of talks is only the beginning of the problem. More important is the political meltdown among the Islamic Republic's leaders. Their problems should help put ours in perspective. Many Americans think Washington

faces gridlock from hyperpartisan politics, though in fact Iran is an exception to that rule. Bills about Iran's nuclear program typically enjoy stunning levels of support -- 100 to 0 in the Senate in the December 2011 round of sanctions. In the November 2012 vote on another sanctions round, several senators were absent, so the vote was a cliffhanger 94 to 0.

By contrast, Iranian leaders fight about everything, even where vital national security interests are at stake. In many respects, a divided Iran is nothing new. The Islamic Republic has from its beginning been characterized by sharp internal divisions. And that has long influenced debate about policy toward the United States. For at least 20 years, the rule in Iran has been: Whoever is out of power wants talks with the United States, which they know would be popular, while whoever is in power moves haltingly if at all toward talks. Several times, those on the outs became the ins and then quickly shifted position on relations with Washington. When Mohammad Khatami was running for president in 1997, he was all in favor of talks with the Great Satan, but then once in power, he did little if anything and refused to speak clearly on the issue. And so too with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: When he was riding high, he only had disdain for the United States, but as he got into trouble at home, he called for talks with Washington.

But now, the situation is much worse than before. It used to be that once Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, spoke, that ended the debate, but no longer. Khamenei no longer enjoys the respect nor commands the power to stop the infighting. No matter how often or bluntly he rejects the idea of negotiations with the United States, other important officials -- most loudly and frequently, Ahmadinejad -- call for such talks.

Khamenei couches his call for obedience as a need for unity and vigilance in the face of the enemy. A typical speech on January 29 warned, "Today the world of Islam is faced with the plot of enemies... We should not fuel the fire of discord by arousing shallow and vulgar feelings. This will burn the fate of nations. It will completely destroy them. It will help the enemies of Islam." Consistent with his longstanding reluctance to publicly weigh in directly on political disputes, Khamenei has usually confined himself to elliptical criticisms, such as his warning in a Feb. 7 speech to Air Force commanders, "The improper conduct which is witnessed in certain areas from certain government officials -- they should end this." He concluded with another strong call for unity.

Admonished by the supreme leader to close ranks, Iranian leaders promptly put on a full display of their bitter enmity. The Majlis, Iran's legislature, called in for questioning Labor Minister Reza Shaikholslami, a close ally of Ahmadinejad. In response, the Iranian president went to the Majlis for the Feb. 3 debate and insisted on accusing Speaker Ali Larijani and his family (including his brother Sadegh Larijani, head of the judiciary) of corruption, playing a recording he claimed supported the charge. Ruled out of order, Ahmadinejad stormed out. The Majlis then voted Shaikholslami dismissed by a vote of 192 to 56; Ahmadinejad promptly added him to his official delegation leaving for Egypt. Five days after the Majlis brawl, 100 Ahmadinejad supporters pelted Ali Larijani with shoes, disrupting a speech he was trying to give in Qom.

Khamenei was clearly appalled that neither his public admonitions nor his reported firm private orders had been enough to stop the feuding. So he lit into the two sides in a Feb. 16 address, saying, "What is the reason behind impeaching a minister a few months before the end of the life of the government, for a reason that had nothing to do with that minister?... The head of one branch of power [Ahmadinejad] accused the two other branches of power based on a charge that was not raised or proved in a court... Such acts are against the sharia as well as the law and ethics." Turning to the disputes about corruption, he added, "I expect the officials to enhance their friendship at this time that enemies have intensified their [hostile] behavior. Be together more than before. Control your wild sentiments." He warned that if they did not follow his counsel, there would be grave consequences.

Khamenei was ignored again. Two days after this speech, the Supreme Court -- largely controlled by Sadeq Larijani -- upheld four death sentences against close Ahmadinejad allies in a high-profile corruption case. Neither the

president nor his equally conservative, hard-line opponents seem to fear Khamenei or much respect his authority anymore.

By their actions, Iranian leaders are giving the strong impression that they are so preoccupied by their internal differences that they cannot agree on, well, a damn thing. Disunity helps the enemy, Khamenei frequently says. But the world powers negotiating with Iran would be glad to see more unity in Tehran, because a more unified Iranian government would be better able to reach a deal and then implement it. That seems less and less likely. The time is rapidly approaching when the big powers, or at least the United States, need to set out a stark choice for Iran's leaders: Either accept a generous offer to resolve the nuclear impasse or be prepared for the consequences.

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