And If Iran Doesn't Want To Talk?

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Articles & Testimony

Six weeks before Iran's descent into electoral chaos, the hardline Iranian cleric Ahmad Khatami rebuked the United States in his Friday sermon, stating, "You do not want talks!"

Ayatollah Khatami (no relation to former president Mohammad Khatami) is clearly not a keen observer of the Washington scene. Given the persistence of American efforts to engage the Iranian regime in dialogue over the last 30 years, and the resilience of the Obama administration's own commitment to engagement, the one constant in American policy toward Iran seems to be that we do indeed want talks.

Hence, as the violence has subsided, attention has turned to whether President Obama still intends to talk to Iran, and if so how.

But this question misses the point. It is a bit like me wondering whether I should invite Angelina Jolie over for dinner: The question isn't really whether I should ask, but how on earth I would get her show up. When it comes to Iran, the question isn't so much whether to engage, but how to get Iran's leaders to want to engage earnestly with us.

While in the past the United States pursued engagement intermittently, in recent years the effort has gained new urgency as Iran has neared the nuclear threshold. It's worth remembering why the Iranian regime wants the bomb, despite all the trouble involved in getting one: Not primarily for prestige, and not primarily to achieve a balance of power with potential foes. Iran wants a nuclear weapon because the regime is insecure to the point of paranoia.

Understanding this insecurity helps to explain many of the regime's actions. Only a jittery regime would so transparently and clumsily rig an election contested only by candidates it had handpicked. And any opening to the U.S. is a threat, not a prize, to a regime that thrives on closure and whose ideology rests on anti-Americanism.

Also evident in the recent violence in Iran, however, was the inescapable fact that neither the United States nor any of its allies can provide the regime with meaningful "security guarantees," which are so often proffered as the key to unlocking a grand bargain with Tehran. No U.S. president would, or for that matter could, protect the regime against the greatest threat to its continued prosperity -- popular resentment.

If we cannot alleviate the pressure on the regime as a means to induce them to accept our offer to negotiate, the only path that remains is to add to that pressure. The free world should fully and speedily respond to Iranian dissidents' calls for support, but we should not aspire to supplant or direct their activities.

There are other means of pressure that are within our control, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation targeted at regime heavyweights. These efforts have recently slowed both as a result of the sequential, engagement-first approach taken by President Obama as well as the dwindling enthusiasm of partners such as Russia and China.

The present crisis provides an opportunity to revive the latter by channeling international disgust with the regime's abuses into concerted action, and suggests a need to revisit the former. While engagement need not be abandoned, it should be pursued in parallel with pressure. The regime must come to see the president's outreach not merely as an invitation, but as an off-ramp from a road that leads to escalating penalties.

The Iranian regime has demonstrated that it is in no mood for compromise, and not particularly eager to win the world's regard. So serious U.S.-Iran engagement is more likely to be the product of a fundamental reorientation by Iran's leaders than to produce one.

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