

# Iran's Place in the Axis:

## Signs of Movement?

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### Brief Analysis

**N**ear the end of the Clinton administration, some analysts expressed a degree of hope that Iran's reform movement would inject some measure of pragmatism into Iranian foreign policy. That hope seems to have faded. The Bush administration has established terrorism and proliferation -- two areas in which Iran has been particularly active -- as top-priority issues, while the previous administration predicated its policy on certain developments within Iran. The parameters for evaluating Iranian foreign policy and U.S.-Iran relations have changed, particularly on the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech has had several surprisingly positive ramifications in Iran, but not on the issue of proliferation. Iranian hardliners feel threatened by the United States and believe that they are a potential target of American military reprisal. In their view, the only way that Iran can negate the asymmetry between its military capacity and that of the United States is through the development of strategic weapons. Thus, President Bush's attempt to warn Iran and other countries about the potential consequences of WMD proliferation may actually have intensified their desire to acquire such weapons.

Iran's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been highly unpopular among the Iranian people. Today, the regime remains unlikely to endorse a U.S.-sponsored peace process; however, if a significant regional actor such as Saudi Arabia takes the initiative, endorses territorial compromises with Israel, and crafts a regional consensus behind this process, Iran will reluctantly go along with this consensus. Iran's reception of Crown Prince Abdullah's peace initiative indicates some potential pragmatism toward this issue, which has long been one of the most inflammatory aspects of Iranian foreign policy.

Although Iran is committed to pursuing a robust nuclear weapons research program, its leaders have not yet made the decision to cross the nuclear threshold. That decision will depend on regional developments, Gulf security, Iran's relationship with the United States, and other relevant factors. Whatever decision is made, it will be based on how Iran weighs its national interests within a given geopolitical context.

Regarding the proposed U.S. attacks against Iraq, Iran will likely stay out of any such conflict, as it has during the campaign in Afghanistan. Any American military move against Iraq would have potential benefits as well as negative implications for Iran. Thus, Tehran would likely avoid the conflict itself, and then attempt to exert influence in a post-war Iraq.

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A dramatic breakthrough in U.S.-Iranian relations is unlikely for two major reasons. First, Iran has ample justification for continuing to pursue hardline policies; despite the objections of the United States, many of these policies are seen as central to Iranian national interests. Consider the first Israeli-Arab peace process. Iran now draws some distinct benefits from its hardline opposition to Israeli-Arab peace, a position that originally hurt Iran's national interests and benefited only the hardline regime. In the past, when the peace process enjoyed broad consensus among Western countries, Iran's sponsorship of organizations violently opposed to the peace process was criticized by these countries, with most agreeing that Iran's disruptive behavior was unacceptable. International perceptions have changed dramatically, however. In many parts of Europe, one now hears talk of an understanding of -- and, outside of government, even a sympathy for -- Iran's position on the peace process. Meanwhile, within many Arab and Muslim-majority countries, Iran is seen as having taken a principled -- and, ultimately, correct -- stance on the issue. And, since the outbreak of the current intifada, Iran has gained from having taken that stance. The peace process may get back on track, however, and Iranian opposition to renewed diplomacy would create major problems for Tehran. After all, it is not just Western countries that now seem to be pushing for a renewal of talks, but also any number of regional players.

The second obstacle to improved U.S.-Iranian relations is terrorism. Many reports suggest that important al-Qaeda figures have sought refuge in Iran. Indeed, supporting al-Qaeda makes sense for the regime, which could arguably see the "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim world and the West as being in its interests. At the moment, Iran is singled out as part of a small "axis of evil," but if that axis were expanded to include more terrorism-supporting countries, Iran would have greater solidarity and support. Working with those inside Afghanistan who want to keep that country destabilized serves Iranian interests as well. Iran opposed the Taliban government, but it was even less favorable to the overthrow of this unpopular, anti-Western clerical regime by U.S. forces.

Many in Iran felt that the aftermath of September 11 had given them a new opportunity to break the stalemate of U.S.-Iranian relations. Several encouraging statements were made by Iranian officials soon after the attacks, and, against that background, President Bush's "axis of evil" speech was a shock to some. But the Karine-A weapons-smuggling affair had been a formative event for President Bush in his approach to Iran, and it continues to fuel his interpretation of Iranian foreign policy. What can be read from that episode is that Tehran will do its best to promote terrorist attacks on Israel, contrary to Iran's own national interests. In this regard, Iranians seem to be aware that the regime's policies may have caused the opportunity for a post-September 11 rapprochement with Washington to disappear. For example, a majority of Majlis (parliament) members recently signed a letter calling for an investigation of the Karine-A episode, as well as an investigation into reports that al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders are hiding in Iran. The Majlis members did not indicate opposition to either development, but instead questioned whether these kinds of policies were in the interests of the Islamic Republic.

The Bush administration remains interested in full dialogue with Iran, and in finding areas of cooperation. During the early Clinton years, many suggested that the United States was insincere when it declared its readiness to talk with Iran, and there was a certain amount of truth in that criticism. The current administration, however, is genuinely interested in establishing regular diplomatic contact. For example, if Iran were interested in holding meetings in Cyprus, the Bush administration would make every effort to ensure that these meetings occurred.

The general feeling in Washington these days is that the reform movement in Iran is not living up to expectations. Whereas the United States once had great confidence that the only remaining question was when -- not whether -- such reforms would take hold, this confidence has now evaporated. In fact, many fear that if the United States is seen as being too closely identified with the reformers, the cause of reform itself could be hurt; therefore, some are suggesting that it is in America's best interests to step back.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rebecca Ingber.

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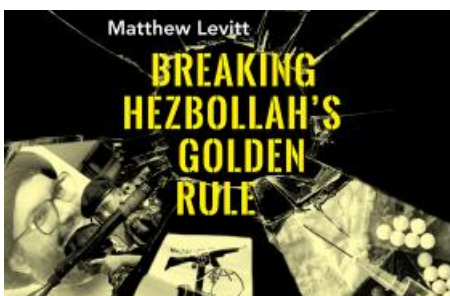
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