

# Iran: Scared Straight?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Brief Analysis

On January 29, President George W. Bush caused considerable consternation among foreign policy analysts by referring to an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address. The analysts worried that the president's castigation of Iran would embolden hardliners who routinely exploit external threats as a means of deflecting attention from their sagging political fortunes. The concern was that, in addition to hurting Iran's reform movement, the president's speech would lead to a more aggressive Iranian foreign policy, ending the modest gains toward U.S.-Iranian rapprochement that were achieved in the last years of the Clinton administration.

But in an ironic twist of events, the "axis of evil" speech seems to have led to a different set of consequences, in which the reformers have employed America's declared antagonism to press further for democratic reforms and a more responsible international policy. The reformers' case has been that an isolated, ostracized Iran is vulnerable to U.S. attack. Suddenly, issues that were long considered taboo, such as the resumption of official relations with Washington, have become subjects of daily discussion on the street, in lecture halls, and on the parliament floor. For now, the hardliners that the president condemned as an "unelected few" seem both unsure of themselves and ambivalent about how to pursue their agenda.

### Internal Political Movement

Since the reelection of President Muhammad Khatami in June 2001, Iran's reform movement has suffered a string of defeats. The conservative minority has refused to accept the legitimacy of the president's agenda and has moved beyond merely silencing critics to suppressing all voices of dissent. From repressing student organizations -- one of the last pillars of the reform movement -- to making an unprecedented attempt to revoke parliamentary immunity from deputies and even jail them for making critical speeches, the hardliners have appeared undaunted by their failing electoral fortunes. The corruption trials scheduled to begin early in 2002 signaled another round of judicial persecutions targeting leading reformers, this time on charges of financial impropriety (a practice hardly unique to the reformers).

But the president's State of the Union address and America's willingness to include Iran as a potential target in the context of the "war on terror" seem to have altered Iranian internal political dynamics. The reformist majority was quick to take advantage of President Bush's accusations, as 172 out of 290 deputies signed a petition in February denouncing the hardliners' "repressive measures against journalistic circles, political activists and students,

torturing those accused of being involved in serial murders, recent economic corruption trials and irresponsible remarks by some officials." As far as the reformers were concerned, Iran's dogmatic clerics were providing Washington with a "pretext" for U.S. threats and denunciations. In a clever move, the reformers endorsed the conservatives' call for national unity but implied that such unity should be based on the wishes of the populace, with respect for their judgments rendered through successive elections. The reformist daily Bonyan pointedly reminded the hardliners that "relying on the powerful and never ending popular supremacy, benefiting from the viewpoints of the intellectuals and politicians and the solutions that they come up with are all sources and ways of facing the threats against the regime and society."

The force of the president's speech, the determination of the U.S. antiterrorism stance, and the pressure generated by the reformers all seem to have weakened the tension within Iranian politics. For example, in the reactionary daily Resalat last week, prominent conservative commentator Amir Mohebian suddenly reversed course, stressing that "those who have been considered oppositionists in the past must now be given the opportunity to be politically active." Mohebian went on to call for a new "national accord" that would "include all active forces in the political arena." Indeed, it would seem that a greater degree of tolerance has gradually crept into Iranian politics; the sixty liberal opposition figures belonging to the Iran Freedom Movement who were convicted on flimsy charges of plotting to overthrow the regime have all been released over the last few months.

#### U.S.-Iran Relations

One of the principal concerns regarding President Bush's use of the "axis of evil" terminology was that it would harden Tehran's stance toward Washington. To be sure, official dialogue with America has always been one of the most contentious topics in Iran, as successive regimes have insisted that no such discussion can take place until Washington rescinds its economic sanctions and unfreezes Iranian assets at the very least. Years of blueprints and roadmaps have yielded little. However, in recent months, there has been much speculation in Iran that this may change. The Iranian press is rampant with rumors that Deputy Foreign Minister Sadeq Kharrazi (nephew of the foreign minister) was dismissed from his post for having direct meetings with U.S. officials. Whatever the veracity of these reports, they come on the heels of an endorsement of contacts with Americans by one of Iran's foremost powerbrokers, Ayatollah Hashim Rafsanjani, the head of the Expediency Council. Last month, he casually noted, "There is no ban on bilateral sociocultural and economic relations between Iran and the U.S." -- admittedly not addressing the issue of political relations.

For now, the most intriguing posture is the one adopted by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who, facing the pressure of the reformists and a changing regional temper, apparently authorized Iran's Supreme National Security Council to assess the merits of commencing a dialogue with the United States. Then, after a month's silence, Khamenei's May Day speech denounced negotiations once again: "Some people's words and thoughts have become all about negotiations with the U.S. They say: 'Hold negotiation so that the U.S. does not threaten and exert pressure. No! Negotiations would resolve no problems. Negotiations with the U.S. would benefit the U.S.'" Khamenei's vacillation stems from his ideological hostility toward the United States on the one hand, and his desire to inject a measure of pragmatism into the historic approach of Iran toward one of its nemeses on the other.

The apparent American resolve has even induced Iran to act with more caution toward the latest crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Israel's incursions into the West Bank appeared to presage a wider regional conflict when Hizballah commenced attacks across the Israeli-Lebanese border. Shortly thereafter -- the day before Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Lebanon -- Iran's foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi met with Hizballah's chief Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and publicly called for restraint. "We should show restraint and not give Israel a pretext to widen the conflict and cover up its failures in Palestine." Kharrazi's stance was assailed by Jamhuri Eslami, a conservative daily that characterized his trip as "strange" and "undiplomatic." Nonetheless, Iran's curiously pragmatic posture

contradicted its past practice of employing all opportunities to inflame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Conclusion

For the past few years, a peculiar stalemate has characterized Iran's internal and external policies. On the domestic front, the hardliners and reformers have been locked in a conflict that neither seems able to conclusively win or categorically abandon. On the critical issue of dialogue with the United States, Iran's cantankerous clerics seem unable to formulate a coherent approach. Iran's existential struggles are hardly over, as the conservatives still maintain considerable institutional power and have shown the willingness to use brutal force to maintain their privileges and prerogatives. But today, there is reason to hope for some more pragmatism in Iran's outlook. In the end, the only safe prognostication is that Iran will continue to defy the expectations of its most seasoned observers.

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