The Tehran Temptation

Jan 1, 2002

Articles & Testimony

Should the United States seek a rapprochement with Iran? After more than two decades of enmity, this question is now very much before us.

Speaking at the United Nations in early November, the Iranian president, Mohammed Khatami, announced that the "nation of Iran has no problem with the people and the nation of America." In light of the unending flow of vituperation that Iran has poured out on the "Great Satan," these were startling words. But the U.S. government, for its part, has hardly been slow in responding. Shortly after Khatami's speech, Secretary of State Colin Powell and the Iranian foreign minister shook hands at a diplomatic gathering in New York, the first such moment since 1979 when 52 American diplomats were seized and held hostage in Iran for fourteen-and-a-half months.

What has given fresh impetus to the cause of engagement with Iran is, of course, September 11. Iran, a country of Shiite Muslims, adjoins Afghanistan, and was itself long locked in conflict with the Sunni Taliban. To the advocates of rapprochement, it was clear that the enemy of our enemy could be our friend, a supplier of intelligence, and perhaps even a friendly base from which U.S. forces could launch missions to rescue American pilots in trouble. And such cooperation, it was hoped, could bloom into something much fuller and friendlier, reducing and eventually ending the acrimony of the past. In line with this understanding, and after consultations with Washington, Jack Straw, the British foreign minister, embarked on a hastily arranged visit to Tehran in a post-September 11 effort to enlist it in the worldwide "coalition" against terrorism. Others in the foreign-policy establishment soon signed on. "It seems to me there is a possibility for at least a limited amount of cooperation" with Iran, said Brent Scowcroft, a former national-security adviser to George Bush and a man with close ties to George W. Bush. Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania opined that "we ought to consider turning over a new leaf and having a conversation" with Iran. More pointedly, the Yale diplomatic historian, John Lewis Gaddis, has lately complained that even as Iran has been "moving toward free elections and a parliamentary system," the United States has still done "nothing to adjust policy."

Given the apparent logic of the argument, and the pressure building behind it, the case for rapprochement would seem to have a lot going for it. Clearly, something is happening inside Iran, as the election of Khatami would alone suggest. Ever since 1992, the European Union has been pursuing trade relations and conducting a "critical dialogue" with the hardline mullahs, and Gaddis is not the only American foreign-policy expert to argue that we should have been doing the same. Writing before the war, Graham Fuller, a former high-ranking intelligence official and now a political scientist at RAND, contended that confrontational American policies had been self-defeating, serving only to strengthen the hardliners, spurring Iran to obstruct the Middle East peace process, and causing "significant" tension between the United States and its European allies.

Whatever the merits of these particular arguments, there can be no question that commercially, diplomatically, and militarily, the United States has a stake in the future of Iran, or that promoting liberalization within that strategically vital country is in our national interest. What is questionable--especially in light of the failure of the European approach to affect Iranian behavior in the least*--is whether "engagement" is the best way to shape developments

there to our advantage.

There are certain facts that even the most ardent proponents of engagement with Iran do not dispute. Perhaps the most significant such facts concern Iran's own relationship to terrorism. "I want to state that under no conditions will we allow any terrorists, as individuals or groups, to enter Iran," President Khatami recently assured a reporter interviewing him for the New York Times. "There are no terrorists in Iran."

Either Khatami has his own private definition of terrorism or he was being facetious. In either case, a rather different picture is painted by the U.S. State Department in its most recent annual report on terrorism, issued last April. According to that report, Iran is nothing less than the world's "most active state sponsor of terrorism."

Much of Iran's pro-terrorist energy is taken up, in the words of the report, by "unrelenting hostility to Israel": Iran has long provided Lebanese Hizbullah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups--notably Hamas, the Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command]--with varying amounts of funding, safe haven, training, and weapons.

But Israel hardly exhausts Iran's interest in promoting terrorism. The country has "also provided a lower level of support--including funding, training, and logistics assistance-to extremist groups in the Gulf, Africa, Turkey, and Central Asia," and has even maintained its thirteen-year-old threat against the novelist Salman Rushdie. As the report notes, "the decree [calling for Rushdie's death] has not been revoked, and the $ 2.8 million bounty for his assassination has not been withdrawn."

Beyond the transgressions enumerated by the State Department are other troubling facts. The Iranian government is implicated in the 1996 bombing of a U.S. Air Force barrack in Saudi Arabia. At the time, the State Department indicated it had "specific information with respect to the involvement of Iranian government officials"; two years earlier, James Woolsey, then the director of the CIA, had declared that Iranian terrorist attacks were "not acts of rogue elements" but were "authorized at the highest levels of the Iranian regime." Iran today continues to shelter suspects implicated in terrorism directed against Americans, including seven of the 22 men on the FBI's "most wanted" terrorist list issued in the wake of September 11.

One of these men is Imad Mughniyeh, regarded by many specialists as a menace in a class with Osama bin Laden. Born in 1962 in Lebanon, Mughniyeh was a founding father of the terrorist organization Hizbullah. He reportedly masterminded the suicide bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1983 as well as attacks against both American and French Marine barracks later that same year. He was the key planner of a series of kidnappings of Westerners in Beirut in the early 1980's, and is believed to have personally tortured and murdered William Buckley, the CIA station chief there. In June 1985, Mughniyeh was one of three Hizbullah activists who hijacked a TWA jetliner, killing an American passenger. He also allegedly helped to conceive and carry out the bombings in Buenos Aires of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and of the Jewish cultural center two years later. Since 1991, Mughniyeh has called Iran home.

Along with sponsoring terrorism and sheltering terrorists, Iran has acquired a sinister reputation in yet another critical area: weapons of mass destruction. According to recent congressional testimony by the CIA's John Lauder, Iran has "ambitious development programs for missiles and weapons of mass destruction" and is avidly seeking "technologies related to missiles, as well as technology related to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, from a number of foreign sources."

What has it accomplished? On the nuclear-weapons front, this much is known: Iran is actively pursuing the acquisition of fissile material and the expertise and technology necessary to form that material into nuclear weapons. As part of this process, Iran is attempting to develop the capability to produce both plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

Nor are Iran's successes limited to the nuclear sphere. In chemical warfare (CW), it "already has produced a number

of CW agents, including nerve, blister, choking, and blood agents." In the realm of biological warfare (BW), it has investigated "both toxins and live organisms as BW agents."

Finally, Iran is far along in developing the means to deliver whatever nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons it obtains. "Iran's ballistic-missile program is one of the largest in the Middle East," according to Lauder, with hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles now in its arsenal and longer-range and even intercontinental missiles under development. For disseminating CW and BW agents, Iran already has ample means, including artillery and aerial bombs.

In the spheres of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, then, Iran is already a menace to its neighbors and soon will be a menace to the entire world. To some, these facts only make the case for engagement all the more compelling; it would be, they say, the best means of tempering the country's ambitions (and incidentally of monitoring its activities). And besides, both Iranian society and Iranian politics have been undergoing profound changes that make the moment ripe for rapprochement.

On this last point the advocates of engagement are certainly right: change is indeed under way in Iran. Only, it is not always in the direction that they suppose, as I can attest on the basis of two extended spells in that country.

My first visit was in 1996, when the president was the relatively hardline Hashemi Rafsanjani. Throughout my stay I was free to roam the streets and to visit friends in both government offices and their homes. My second visit took place three years later, when Khatami was well into his first term--and the situation had changed considerably for the worse. Religious police were conducting more round-ups in the streets; the authorities were actively seeking to restrict the movements of visiting American students; and on more than one occasion Iranian friends politely suggested that lunch in a hotel might be safer for them than inviting an American to their home or office. That is still the way things are today.

The origins of the current, more fearful climate are not hard to grasp. As weariness and disillusionment with strict Islamic rule have taken hold of Iranian society, so too has the wrath of the mullahs and of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Sensing power slipping from their grasp, the clerics are determined to retain it, come what may.

They know they have their work cut out for them. The anti-American diatribes emanating from Tehran's government-controlled media notwithstanding, most Iranians these days are not seething with hatred for the United States. Neither would it be fair to say that they are ambivalent. The simple fact is that most Iranians are zealously, outspokenly, pro-American. American fashions and American popular music are in. Scholarships to study at American universities are prized, green cards doubly so. Baywatch seemed to be playing on television in almost every home I visited.

This, however, is far from the whole story. In south Tehran, as in every Iranian city, there are impoverished neighborhoods where the radicals and the paramilitary bands readily find recruits. This underclass is a minority, but it is a disproportionately influential one, and the clerics who draw political sustenance from it are the men who wield real power in Iran today.

True, Iran has an elected parliament and an elected president, just as the proponents of engagement assert. But these are less the appurtenances of a working democracy than the trappings of a theocratic dictatorship seeking to present itself as a democracy. True, too, there is a genuine reform movement in Iran, whose adherents have won elections by increasing majorities. But this again is not the decisive thing, and will not be until the theocrats and the paramilitary formations that back them resolve to hand over power and fade away. So far, in all important respects, they remain firmly in control.

At the same time, and despite the large electoral margins by which he won the presidency, Khatami appears to be

rapidly falling from grace among the same middle-class citizens who have been his most fervent supporters. Soccer riots this past October, which received only passing notice in the Western press, were of seismic significance in this respect: along with chants of "death to Khamenei," another slogan heard coming from the crowd was "death to Khatami."

Although Iranians do not express it in these terms, Khatami is emerging as a kind of Gorbachev figure, a man struggling desperately to repair and rescue the ailing theocratic system of rule by giving it a human face. He is commonly perceived in the West as a "moderate" or a "liberal," but these words, if they apply at all, must be understood in a context very different from our own. On some matters, as the State Department's annual report on terrorism makes clear, Khatami and Khamenei are not dove and hawk but birds of a feather.

Thus, to the hardliner Khamenei, Israel is a "cancerous rumor"; to the moderate Khatami, an "illegal entity." Both men are part and parcel of a government openly committed to "continue its campaign against Zionism until Israel is completely eradicated." Both are part and parcel of a government that recently convicted thirteen Iranian Jews on entirely baseless charges of spying for Israel. Over the past eighteen months, the government they head has closed more than 50 newspapers. In November, Iran's judiciary began the largest trial of political dissidents in the two decades of Islamic rule, with over 60 defendants facing possible death sentences. Only recently, the police seized thousands of satellite dishes and closed Internet-service providers in a (futile) attempt to seal off news of the outside world.

Both the deepening crackdown and the rising unrest in Iran present opportunities for the U.S.--and dangers as well. Whether it was Jimmy Carter's national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in the days prior to the hostage seizure in 1979, or Ronald Reagan's national-security adviser Robert McFarlane at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, previous American efforts to seek accommodation with Iran's ayatollahs have not only failed, but failed miserably, leaving us worse off than before and enhancing the power of our adversaries.

The Iranian people are at long last openly showing their discontent with the repression and misery in which they live. Is this the moment for Washington to firm up ties with a government that shows signs of teetering, and may actually have begun to fall? Eliot A. Cohen, writing recently in the Wall Street Journal, cut to the core of the matter:

"We can either make tactical accommodations with the regime there in return for modest (or illusory) sharing of intelligence, reduced support for some terrorist groups, and the like, or do everything in our power to support a civil society that loathes the mullahs and yearns to overturn their rule. It will be wise, moral, and unpopular (among some of our allies) to choose the latter course. The overthrow of the first theocratic revolutionary Muslim state ... and its replacement by a moderate or secular government would be no less important a victory in this war than the annihilation of bin Laden."

This is not the first time we have been tempted to extend an olive branch, and a helping hand, to a militant anti-democratic dictatorship, only to have the branch rebuffed and the hand bitten. The war on terrorism has opened up real possibilities for radical change in Middle Eastern politics, and not least in Iran. It would be worse than a shame if, for the sake of avoiding hard decisions, we were to choose the route of accommodation and appeasement, and betray both our own interests and the millions of Iranians who may today constitute the most pro-American people in the entire world. ❖

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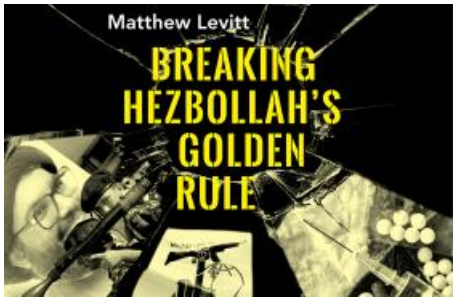

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