

What Has Impeded Progress in U.S.-Iran Relations?

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Brief Analysis

After much experimentation, the Clinton administration settled on a policy of incremental normalization with Iran, whereby the United States and Iran would gradually improve their relations through mutual concessions and confidence-building measures. As the Bush team assesses policy options towards Iran, it is important to note the meager results of the Clinton team's creative efforts.

Background: Clinton Administration Carpet Diplomacy Prior to the election of the moderate Muhammad Khatemi to Iran's presidency in 1997, the Clinton administration's approach to Iran was based on the policy of containment. Under the rubric of this policy, President Bill Clinton issued an executive order in March 1995 prohibiting most trade with Iran, particularly in the critical petroleum sector. However, the election of Khatemi changed the context of U.S.-Iran relations and introduced the possibility of a more flexible policy toward Iran. The newly inaugurated Iranian president seemed to encourage the United States in his January 1998 CNN interview when he called for a "crack in the walls of mistrust." The American response was delivered by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in a well-publicized June 1998 speech to the Asia Society: "We can develop with the Islamic Republic, when it's ready, a road map leading to normal relations." But it appeared that the Islamic Republic was not yet ready for such normalized relations. Addressing the same Asia Society in September 1998, Iran's foreign minister Kemal Kharrazi criticized the United States for its "outdated behavior" and emphasized that "sole reliance on variation of verbiage, can simply not provide the necessary basis for an invitation to political dialogue."

The next round of U.S.-Iran diplomatic minuet took place after the momentous February 2000 Iranian parliamentary elections where the reformers took 220 out of 290 seats. Once more, the United States viewed the event as a propitious time to make a gesture toward Iran. In March 2000, Albright addressed the American-Iranian Council and proclaimed, "my hope is that in both Iran and the United States, we can plant the seeds now for a new and better relationship in years to come." In addition, Albright announced a selective lifting of sanctions with the removal of import bans on Iran's carpets, pistachio nuts, and caviar. However, the U.S. gesture coincided with a conservative backlash in Iran — responsible for the closure of many reform newspapers and the jailing of editors — and Tehran's response was inflexible, focusing on the remaining economic sanctions. Ultimately, the episode failed to measurably advance the cause of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement.

The U.S.-Iran Diplomatic Interplay Resurfaced in September 2000 Iran's Parliament Speaker Mehdi Karrubi attended an Inter-Parliamentary Union gathering in New York, designed to boost cooperation among worldwide parliamentarians. The speaker's visit was an occasion for more diplomatic activity, such as the "chance" meeting of


important American legislatures including Senator Arlen Specter and Representative Gene Ackerman at a reception at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts. A few days later, President Khatemi delivered a speech at a conference of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in New York, and made a pressing call for a "dialogue among the civilizations." In an important symbolic step, Albright attended that speech and stressed that her attendance was a "signal to the Iranians that we're willing to listen to what they have to say." In an even more important symbolic gesture just a few days later, President Clinton extended his stay at the UN General Assembly millennium summit meeting to hear Khatemi address the plenum. However, in all these meetings, the Iranians did little to advance U.S.-Iran relations, instead confining themselves to predictable complaints about U.S. sanctions with Karrubi insisting that, "[the] United States must stop its hostile behavior towards Iran and not put under pressure foreign and American firms which were willing to establish relations with Iran."

Iran's Turf Wars The current impasse in U.S.-Iran relations has much to do with the increasing polarization of Iran's domestic political scene. At a time when the hardliners are muzzling Iran's once-vibrant press, persecuting writers and intellectuals and effectively blocking the Parliament from taking substantive measures, the possibility of improved relations with the controversial United States is limited. It seems highly likely that Iran's domestic political situation will continue to thwart the potential for a thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations.

Iran's presidential election, scheduled for May 2001, takes place against the backdrop of a peculiar political duality. Iran's reformers enjoy widespread popular legitimacy while the hardliners retain institutional power. The conservatives, led by the Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have employed their control of the judiciary and informal pressure groups to obstruct the edicts of the reformed parliament and disrupt the gatherings of students and reform activists. The delicate balance of power between the two factions has caused a disturbing stagnation, as the reformers triumph in elections but remain seemingly incapable of legislating their mandate.

The forces of reform seem to rest their faith on the notion that a second Khatemi presidency will be more energetic in the pursuit of a robust reform agenda. In the past few weeks, Khatemi has encouraged such speculation by publicly acknowledging the inadequacy of his previous efforts and the need for constitutional rearrangement to further empower the office of the presidency. Khatemi's efforts seemed to have had the result of coalescing the reform movement behind his probable candidacy. Subsequent to a November Khatemi meeting with Tehran University students, many of the assembled student activists seemed assured that Khatemi would reinvigorate the cause of reform subsequent to his reelection. As one student in attendance said, "The people must assist Khatemi in his struggle with his opponents. It is a mistake to say he has no value." These hopes may prove to be hollow, but for now such sentiments seem to sustain Iran's increasingly restive reform movement. Despite much speculation, Iran's domestic political impasse is unlikely in the short-term to degenerate into violence and civil strife. Iranian society, brutalized by a violent revolution, prolonged war, and the serial killing of intellectuals, displays an understandable aversion to resolving political disputes through civil conflict.

Conclusion The Clinton administration's experiment with incremental normalization with Iran produced few results. The primary cause of the failure to advance U.S.-Iran relations was the internal dynamics of Iran's political situation. The constant power struggles and the shifting fortunes of the reform movement make a bold breakthrough in U.S.-Iran relations improbable in the immediate future. The Bush administration will be tempted to retain Clinton's model and make both political gestures and limited concessions as a means of generating dialogue between the two states. However, the central lesson of the Clinton-Albright approach is that Iran's theocrats need first resolve their domestic quandaries before deciding on how and whether to approach Washington. In the parlance of the day, the ball is now in Iran's court.

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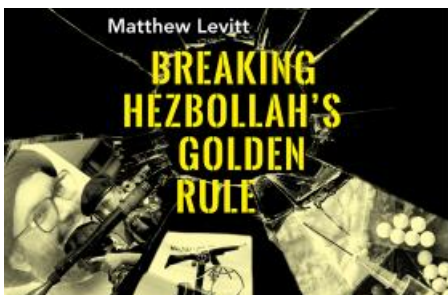
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