

Iran: Dialogue Abroad, Violence at Home

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Brief Analysis

Iranian President Muhammad Khatami's international charm offensive continues at the UN Millennium Summit, where today he hosts a "Dialogue of Civilizations" and tomorrow he speaks to the General Assembly. Meanwhile, at home, Khatami faces violence rather than dialogue, raising doubts about Iran's peaceful reform.

The Iranian Charm Offensive. Last week, Majlis (parliament) Speaker Mehdi Karubi was proclaiming Iran's commitment to reformulating its relationship with the Interparliamentary Union Conference in New York. Uncharacteristically sensitive to Western sensibilities, the Iranians included both Jewish and female representatives in their delegation. At a reception sponsored by the America-Iran Council, Karubi met Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Congressmen Robert Ney (R-Ohio), Gary Ackerman (D-NY), and Eliot Engle (D-NY). In what Specter described as "warm and friendly" talks, each side raised some of its concerns: the Americans discussed the fate of imprisoned Iranian Jews on charges of spying for Israel, and Karubi called on the US congress to, "stop its hostile behavior towards Iran and not to put pressure on foreign and American firms which are willing to establish relations with Iran." While such a meeting may seem inconsequential, it chipped away at the long-standing Iranian rejection of official discussions between the U.S. and Iranian governments. Karubi also met with representatives of Chevron, Conoco and Exxon Mobil, to whom he noted, "It seems that there are efforts under way in the United States for lifting sanctions against Iran."

This week, President Khatami will use his UN trip to further reduce Iran's regional isolation. No longer upset about Iran's one-time support for the Islamic insurgency that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has already announced his intention of meeting with Khatami, explaining, "Iran is in the process of opening up." Khatami may also meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to announce a resumption of diplomatic relations, severed in 1979 by Iran on account of revulsion over Cairo's peace accord with Israel and Egypt's hospitality to the ex-Shah.

A more intriguing prospect lies in the possibility of a "chance" encounter at the UN between President Clinton and

Khatami, which some have been working for months to arrange. Asked today if Clinton was going to meet Khatami, national security advisor Samuel Berger's carefully phrased response was, "We have no plans to meet with President Khatami."

At Home: Violence, Not Dialogue. While Khatami is singing the praises of dialogue abroad, at home his opponents are escalating their confrontation with the reform movement. No longer content with using their control of the judiciary to shut down the reformist press, the regime's hardliners have turned on the largest pro-Khatami student movement, the Office for Strengthening Unity (Daftar-i Tahkim-i Vahdat, or DTV). Its annual national convention, licensed by the Khatami-controlled Interior Ministry, was met in late August by a week of violent attacks that convulsed the city of Khorammabad, in Iran's southwest Luristan province.

On August 24, two prominent reform intellectuals, Hojatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar and Abdul Karim Soroush, were met at the Khorammabad airport by a radical mob that threatened their lives until they escaped by car headed for Tehran. The mob beat up the Khatami-appointed provincial deputy governor, a wheelchair-bound war veteran. At the next day's Friday prayers, Khorammabad's Khamenei-appointed Friday Prayer leader Hojatoleslam Seyyed Kazem Hussein-Mianji said, "Those two people ran away. Now we must get the rest of the unwanted guests and this gang out of this province as quickly as possible. Luristan is not the place for them." In other words, the chief Khamenei appointee in Luristan applauded those who beat up the number-two Khatami appointee in the province.

From then on, violence escalated and the situation deteriorated. Responding to the call from the prayer leader, radicals went on the rampage on August 26 and 27, burning banks and government offices. Police—at least nominally under the control of the Khatami-run Interior Ministry—intervened; twenty policemen were injured and one killed. The response of the provincial commander of the Khamenei-controlled Revolutionary Guard, Brigadier-General Gholamreza Suleimani, was to warn the reformers: "If the false claimants of tolerance and rationality believe that, when they take their next steps, they will again meet with a restrained and limited response from the brave Basiji and Hezbollahi people of Khorammabad, they are mistaken." At the slain policeman's funeral on August 29, the radical mob beat up provincial Governor-General Nurollah Abedi.

The brazen violence against Khatami government officials in Khorammabad shocked the reform majority in the Majlis, which is considering opening an investigation. What that would accomplish is unclear. Ali Shakourirad, a reformist member of the Majlis leadership expressed his exasperation: "If the system is not capable of safeguarding the security of a lawful gathering, then it has contradicted its own existence."

It is less and less clear whether reformers will ever be able to achieve their goals by peaceful means. Many hardliners no longer pretend that the people will be allowed to choose what kind of government Iran has. As Hojatolislam Ruhollah Hosseinian, one of the most influential clerics in the conservative establishment, explained this week, "This is a guided republic...The nature of our system requires supervision so it does not deviate from the Islamic framework." If the hardliners refuse to bend, those unwilling to wait for reform will eventually react—young reformers are not necessarily as patient as the movement's leaders. The DTV called off its July 9 Tehran University commemorations of the 1999 riots, but thousands proceeded to demonstrate anyway, despite attacks by radicals.

U.S. Policy: First and Last, Do No Harm. In Iran's dramatically polarized domestic political scene, the hardliners have used the reformers' alleged desire to restore ties with the "Great Satan" as a weapon to de-legitimize the reform movement. The beleaguered hardliners fallaciously charge reformers with complicity with the United States, hoping to use the charge as a means of resurrecting their lost influence. Former president Ali Rafsanjani captured this sentiment when he attributed the recent upheavals to the United States and its reformist Iranian agents. In a typical Iranian style of subtle allusion, Rafsanjani declared at Tehran prayers last Friday, "There are elements inside the country who are bent on fulfilling the promises given by the Americans that this would be a tumultuous year for Iran."

The United States has an important stake in democratization in Iran, but American ability to shape conditions in Iran is limited. An open, concerted American policy of aiding the reformers would merely fall into the trap laid by the conservatives and make the reform movement vulnerable to a hardliner backlash. Iran must reform on its own timetable and according to its own internal dynamics. Any external attempt to tilt the balance of power will be counterproductive and ultimately self-defeating. The best strategy for the United States is benign passivity.

U.S. policy towards Iran at present seems to be incremental normalization, including steps taken to ease sanctions. There has been little if any response from Iran. Reformers purposely do not react, since any positive response would leave them open to hardliners' criticism. Further U.S. incremental steps would make relations with the United States an issue in Iranian politics, and that would not help the reformers. The optimal approach, therefore, is to remain on the sidelines of the great Iranian internal debate rather than to take additional incremental steps.

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