

Advancing U.S. Interests and Better Relations with Iran

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Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's March 17 speech to the Conference on American-Iranian Relations was a milestone in the slowly improving bilateral ties. Although a number of useful ideas were broached, on balance the speech missed a golden opportunity to make common cause with reformist supporters of Iranian president Muhammad Khatami on a "rule of law" issue that matters both to American national security and to the reformist movement: terrorism by Iran's hardliners at home and abroad.

Missed Opportunities. U.S. policy toward Iran is caught in a false debate about whether to be "tough" or "soft," which leaves the United States being too tough on the Iranian people and too soft on the hard-line actions of the Iranian government. The Albright speech missed the opportunity to reach out forcefully to the Iranian people by pointing out how they and the United States both face problems from Iranian hardliners.

Front and center in U.S. policy toward Iran should be the terrorism that has struck both Americans and reform-minded Iranians. Just last week, prominent Iranian newspaper editor Saeed Hajjarian was shot by men riding on a large motorcycle of the type legally restricted to the military and law enforcement officials. Meanwhile, by press reports, hardliners rejected Khatami's proposal to respond positively to President Bill Clinton's 1999 letter requesting that Tehran cooperate in the investigation of the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, in which eighteen U.S. airmen died. The connection between domestic and foreign terrorism may be even tighter: It may be the same Intelligence Ministry that harbors those who shoot reformers and that protects the suspects in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, two of whom are living in Iran. That ministry acts like a force unto itself unresponsive to either the Majlis or the president. The cause of Iranian reform would benefit by highlighting what a problem the Intelligence Ministry has become.

Fighting the terrorists harbored inside Iran's government is one issue that unites the domestic policy concerns of Iranian reforms with the foreign policy issues that interest the United States. The U.S. approach to counterterrorism, which emphasizes law enforcement and downplays terrorism's political side, is well suited to reaching out to Iranian reformers who have made rule of law a central issue. The decision to emphasize law enforcement was used after the Khobar Towers bombing to justify the failure to take retaliatory action based on intelligence information. Having made that decision, the United States should stick with it by insisting that Iran expel the suspects. As President Clinton said after Khobar, "No matter how long it takes or where it takes us, we will pursue terrorists until the cases

are solved and justice is done."

Besides using its bully pulpit to remind Iranians of the common concerns they and the U.S. government have about fighting government-sponsored terrorism, U.S. policy should reach out to ordinary Iranians by clearly distinguishing them from the Iranian government. So, for instance, the relaxation of sanctions should focus on goods produced by private citizens, not on goods like caviar, which are the output of government monopolies. Carpets are the principal export of the Iranian private sector, and that fact should have been highlighted in explaining why the United States is allowing in carpets but not petroleum. The explanation should have been made crystal clear: Carpet sales benefit civil society, oil sales benefit the government.

Miscues. The speech had more than its share of miscues. For example, Albright said, "Nearly a million Iranian Americans have made our country their home"; actually, the 1990 Census found only 226,123 (167,275 immigrants and 58,848 born in the United States). More important was her statement, "The authorities exercising control in Tehran financed and supported terrorist groups, including those violently opposed to the Middle East peace process"--as if there was some distinction between "the authorities exercising control in Tehran" and the Iranian government. The United States must hold the entire Iranian government responsible for the actions of its agents.

She also said America's policy toward Iran "has been a policy of isolation and containment," whereas U.S. statements of the last decade have said that the United States wants to engage Iran and does not want to isolate it (a rough analogy: for fifty years, U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union was containment but with lots of engagement). If Iran and the United States are isolated from each other, the responsibility lies with Tehran, which refuses to talk to the U.S. government and which refuses to allow U.S. consular officers in Iran (the lack of such offices is the main source of the problems Iranians face in trying to visit the United States).

And then there was Albright's focus on past U.S. policy mistakes. She acknowledged errors, without using the magic word "apology," in U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and for the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq. No one in Tehran broaches the idea of Iran apologizing, even though Iran's government has been directly responsible for more U.S. deaths in the past two decades than any other government in the world, given its terrorist involvement from Beirut to Khobar. And it is peculiar to describe as an "error" the support to Iraq at a time when it was being invaded by Iran, while not mentioning that in 1985-86, the United States sold Iran arms with which it attacked its neighbor. To be more cynical, U.S. interests were well served by a war that drained the revolutionary fervor from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iran as well as diverting the energies of the megalomaniac in Baghdad.

Unartful Steps. The centerpiece of Albright's speech was, "Today, I am announcing a step which will enable Americans to purchase and import carpets and food products such as dried fruits, nuts, and caviar from Iran." That sounds impressive, but Iranians will discover it promises more than it delivers. The secretary did not mention that Iranian pistachios--which are the main food product Iran exports--are subject to prohibitive duties (283 percent for raw pistachios and 318 percent for roasted pistachios, under Antidumping Order A507502 and Countervailing Duty Order C507501, on top of the normal duty). As California Pistachio Commission president Karen Reinecke put it, "What happens when Iran gets the news today and they are all excited and want to ship to the United States but they won't be able to? It's kind of an empty promise from the United States."

On the other hand, perhaps it is good that Iranian pistachios cannot find a market in the United States. At least 70 percent of Iran's pistachio trade is controlled by the family of former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani. Indeed, while he was president, Rafsanjani shut down a magazine that had the temerity to publish a petition from the pistachio growers of the Rafsanjan region complaining about how his family had monopolized the trade to its profit. It would be peculiar timing for the United States to offer a prize worth millions of dollars to the Rafsanjani family just after he was badly bruised in the Majlis elections, having barely won a seat by placing thirtieth in Tehran when he

had expected the number one slot. It is not clear why the United States would want to enable the corruption of an unpopular, out-of-power politician whom a Belgian court is considering indicting for his human rights abuses, à la Augusto Pinochet.

Nevertheless, if the pistachio announcement made the United States look hypocritical, the timing of Albright's speech made the United States look inconsistent. Four days before Albright's speech, President Clinton wrote to the House Speaker and the Senate President extending the sanctions on Iran's oil and gas industry--an action much noted in the Iranian press. The step was purely technical: Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, the president can impose sanctions only a year at a time, and March 15 was the last day on which those could be renewed. But it would have been possible to renew those sanctions before Iran's February 18 Majlis elections.

In sum, Albright's speech could have been a more powerful overture to the people of Iran than it was. The challenge facing U.S. policymakers is to extend a hand of friendship to Iranians while firmly rejecting hard-line Iranian government actions.

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