

Europe's Critical Dialogue with Iran: An Assessment

Jan 10, 2000



Brief Analysis

Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi arrived in London on Sunday to start a new initiative to break Iran further out of isolation. Europe has sought to engage Iran as the best way to promote Iranian moderation and reform. With Iran's parliamentary elections approaching next month, there will almost certainly be renewed interest in whether the United States should adopt such a policy of engagement. So this is an opportune time to ask, Has Europe's engagement policy influenced Iran to scale back terrorism, stop violent undermining of the Middle East peace process, moderate its human rights record, stop pursuing weapons of mass destruction, or open up its political system? Or are the hard-liners taking advantage of Iran's moderated image to pursue business as usual?

Background. Europe first adopted an engagement policy toward Iran in 1992 but then suspended it in 1997 after a German court found top Iranian officials complicit in terrorist killings in Berlin. The engagement policy was renewed with vigor, however, after Muhammad Khatami's election as president later in 1997. In 1999, the European Union's efforts to engage Iran include a March visit by Khatami to Italy and the Vatican and an October visit to Paris. Speaking in Prague, Italian premier Massimo D'Alema commented, "Breaking Iran's years of isolation is a step in the right direction and Europe must encourage such reforming tendencies." At an October 29, 1999, press conference, François Rivasseau, a French deputy foreign ministry spokesman, commented that France supported Khatami's reforms and hoped that his visit would pave the way for French business opportunities.

Terrorism. There is little evidence that Iranian support for terrorism has ended during the period of European engagement. In November at a meeting of counterterrorism officials of the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized nations, British and German officials presented evidence that the terrorist threat from Iran is growing. According to the Washington Post, the U.S. administration has concluded that Iran is increasing the flow of arms and money to Hizballah and Hamas violence so as to derail the peace process. Meanwhile, Iran has been unwilling to act on the U.S. request to make available for questioning some suspects in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing--in which nineteen U.S. servicemen were killed--who remain in a safe house in South Tehran. This coming March, American, Canadian, and European officials will meet to assess the continuing Iranian terrorist threat. It will be interesting to see what evidence, if any, European governments can present that their dialogue with the Iranian government has reduced Iranian support for terrorism.

Middle East Peace Process. In the days after the restart of Syrian-Israeli talks on December 6, the Iranian press was initially muted, but it has since taken an increasingly hostile stance. On December 31, Majlis (parliament) Speaker 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri called for "wiping Israel off the world map" and Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i called for the "annihilation" of Israel. In a clear criticism of Syria for negotiating with Israel, Khamene'i said, "I don't want to cite the one-time revolutionary nations by name . . . but any negotiation with the Zionist regime amounts to treason."

Human Rights. It is unclear whether Iran's human rights record has improved during the period of intense European engagement. In March, Iranian authorities arrested thirteen Iranian Jews on charges of spying for Israel and the

United States. All thirteen remain in prison and have not been tried. Despite French prime minister Lionel Jospin's promise to discuss the case with Khatami during the latter's October visit, there has been no progress to win the Jews' release.

When asking what European engagement has accomplished, an instructive case to consider is that of Salman Rushdie. In September 1998, Tehran and London agreed to exchange ambassadors after Foreign Minister Kharrazi announced that Iran would no longer pursue Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa (edict) calling for the death of British author Salman Rushdie. Tehran got what it wanted--a boost in international confidence and confirmation in the public mind that the days of revolutionary excess were over. Yet, Ayatollah Khamene'i still endorses the death sentence, and semiofficial organizations including the Khordad Foundation continue to promise the bounty. On December 28, 1999, the Basij branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that more than five hundred Muslims had each agreed to sell one of their kidneys to fund Rushdie's assassination. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, a senior member of the government, has preached in favor of the fatwa in March and August 1999 sermons.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). There is little evidence that heavy European economic engagement with Iran has encouraged that country to slow its pursuit of dangerous technologies. General Anthony Zinni, who oversees U.S. forces in the Middle East, predicted in December to *Aviation Week and Space Technology* that in the coming months Iran will test its Shahab-4 ballistic missile. The Shahab-4 will have ample range to reach all of Israel from launching pads in central Iran, which would be far from attack by hostile aircraft. In November 1999, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov promised that Russia would finish Iran's nuclear reactor at Bushehr, declaring, "The construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant concerns only Iran and Russia." Meanwhile, some Iranian leaders are unenthusiastic about the country's commitments not to develop nuclear or biological weapons: In April 1998, IRGC commander Yahya Rahim Safavi disparaged the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention in a meeting with IRGC top officers.

Domestic Reform. It is not clear if engagement has facilitated reforms or instead provided the resources by which the government could muddle through without reforms. Certainly the record of the Khatami years on political and economic reforms has been mixed. Hard-line clerical courts have closed reformist newspapers and put some of Khatami's closest allies in prison. According to the January 10 *Tehran Times*, Khatami's closest supporters in the Majlis may be banned from seeking reelection. Khatami's interior minister, moreover, acknowledged in December that he does not control the police.

Nor has the European policy of engagement shown obvious successes at promoting stability in Iran. Indeed, the last year has seen serious unrest. July 1999 saw the worst rioting in Iran since the revolution, after the hard-line group Ansar-i Hizballah attacked a student dormitory. Since then, violent riots have regularly erupted in poor districts. On January 3 and 4, 2000, violent riots occurred in a township south of Tehran; on January 6, protestors in southwestern Iran burned down a police station (with the local IRGC unit joining in the rioting); and some reports indicate that, on January 7, Iranian police opened fire on demonstrators in Tabriz.

Conclusion. Critics of Washington's Iran policy like to say that there is little evidence that the tough U.S. stance has achieved U.S. goals. Perhaps not, though at least U.S. policy reduces the resources Iran has available to engage in the destabilizing actions to which Washington objects. And the objection could be turned on its head: It is not clear that Europe's policy of engaging Iran has been successful at promoting more moderate Iranian actions or at helping the cause of Iranian reform. It could be argued that, instead, hard-liners have taken advantage of Khatami's soft words to mask continued terrorism and WMD development. Some of the same people who criticize the United States for having engaged undemocratic forces in Iran in 1953 propose that the United States should today engage Iran's undemocratic rulers. Change appears to be coming to Iran, and U.S. policymakers and businesses may benefit in the long term by standing firm against those who are blocking it.

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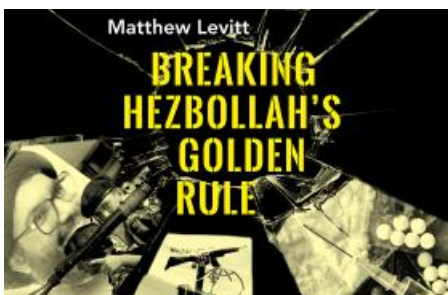
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