

Assessing Iranian Reportage on U.S.-Iran Contacts

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Brief Analysis

For the last two weeks, the major Iranian newspapers have been full of reports about official contacts between the U.S. and Iranian governments. These reported contacts include a U.S. request that Tehran hand over individuals now in Iran whom the U.S. government believes are responsible for the deaths of nineteen U.S. servicemen in the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers building in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. These reports may well be mischaracterizations or exaggerations of what both governments acknowledge was a recent letter from the U.S. government to the Iranian government, a letter both sides describe as routine. Yet, it is also possible the reports are accurate; stranger things have happened--such as the Irancontra affair. Although any U.S. contact with Iran about Khobar, if true, would be a blockbuster story, the Iranian media reportage is in itself important for what it reveals about Iranian attitudes toward the United States and toward terrorism.

High-Level Discussions with Iran? In the September 10, 1999, Kuwaiti al-Watan newspaper, London-based Iranian journalist Ali Nouri-Zadeh reported that an Iranian diplomat close to Iranian president Muhammad Khatami met a U.S. National Security Council (NSC) official in Rome last spring. That diplomat, Nouri-Zadeh reported, briefed Khatami on the results and received guidelines about Iran's expectations from the United States, leading to three meetings over five days in late August in Geneva with the NSC official. The al-Watan article was widely repeated in the Iranian press.

Even if the reports are completely wrong, good news still exists based on what did not happen in Iran in reaction to the reports. In times past, any suggestion that there may have been official contact with the U.S. government set off a firestorm in Iran; after all, the 1979 embassy seizure was touched off by the meeting in Algiers between U.S. national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Iranian prime minister. By contrast, this al-Watan report caused little reaction; there were only a few critical comments, and those received little publicity. Khatami's hardline critics have been eager to criticize his government for deviating from the true revolutionary path, so it is particularly intriguing that they have not seized on the issue of the reported contacts with the U.S. government by a Khatami confidant--this would in the past have been used as an opportunity to savage moderates for abandoning the path of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The silence offers some grounds for optimism that the taboo on talking to Washington is weakening.

If the reports are true, government-to-government contacts would be a considerable step forward. Such talks are in

the interest of both Iran and the United States, as they can only benefit from airing their differences and exploring areas of common interest. Although talks would be in Iran's interest, Tehran has refused them: It has been the only government in the world that refuses to talk to Washington. Actually, there has been a lively debate in Iran about policy toward dialogue with Washington. The majority of the elite favor normal economic ties but no political contacts until the day the United States changes its policies. In the words of supreme leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, talks with the United States would be like the sheep talking to the wolf; such talks, he has said, would become appropriate only when the United States repents of all its sins in the Middle East. A hardline minority opposes economic ties and rules out political contacts at any time in the future as a matter of principle. And it appears there is a silent group, including many Iranian diplomats, who have little say in setting the country's foreign policy. That group, in its heart, favors restoring correct relations, though by no means friendly relations, with the U.S. government to explore issues of common interest, such as battling the drug trade from Afghanistan.

Khobar What caught the attention of the Iranian media was not so much the reported official contacts with the U.S. government but instead the reported U.S. demand for handing over specific individuals said to be responsible for the Khobar Towers bombing. This generated much comment across the political spectrum, from hardline newspapers like Jomhuri-ye Islami and Kayhan, as well as from moderates such as Akhbar-e Eghtesad (the latest incarnation of the reform paper the authorities keep shutting only to have it appear under a new name), and from the semi-official English-language Tehran Times.

The Iranian reports reveal much about Iranian attitudes toward terrorism. Iranian newspapers have not felt compelled to put any distance between Iran and the Khobar bombing; not even the moderates have included a ritual condemnation of terror. Instead, the big issue of debate has been how should Iran respond to the U.S. request. The al-Watan version is that Iran's top leaders differed sharply on the matter. Khatami reportedly proposed negotiations, whereas 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khatami's predecessor and the current chairman of the Expediency Council, insisted that Iran first demand that the United States hand over the captain of the USS Vincennes, which was responsible for the accidental July 1988 shoot-down of an Iranian civilian passenger Airbus. Regardless of whether any of this happened, what the Iranian newspaper reports reflect is that Iranian opinion-shapers feel little need to condemn the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy.

If indeed the United States has been able to identify who was responsible for the Khobar Towers bombing with the degree of certainty needed to ask Iran to hand them over for trial, that would be quite an accomplishment. The criminal justice standard for determining responsibility is a tough one to meet in any circumstances, but it was particularly challenging for Khobar Towers--where the local Saudi authorities lacked technical proficiency, were sensitive about perceived slights to national pride, and were unenthusiastic about following up clues if they suggested powerful neighboring countries were involved in the bombing. If the U.S. government has determined who was responsible for the Khobar bombing, then the question will be how it puts into practice U.S. president Bill Clinton's pledge that "the cowards who committed this murderous act must not go unpunished."

What Next? Much can be learned by watching political debates in Iran, which are likely to be particularly lively in the lead-up to the February 2000 Majlis (parliament) elections. From the evidence of the last two weeks, there appears to be some grounds for optimism that the taboo on talking with the United States is weakening. Yet, it would be inappropriate to read that as meaning that Iran will change its foreign policy and drop the practices to which the United States objects, such as the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy. Dialogue does not mean agreement on all issues: it just means an exchange of views, perhaps leading to the identification of limited areas of common interest.

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