

# Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis

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## The US and Iran: Caveats to Consider in US Negotiations With Iran

**Analysis. By Dr Assad Homayoun\*.** US Pres. Barack Obama has taken the first steps towards implementing his Administration's new policy towards the Middle East. He has also announced his intention to open a dialogue and "extend a hand" to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran providing they "unclench their fist".

While there is no doubt that the President has some very able and seasoned advisors, it is important to bring to his attention the hopes and the aspirations of the silent Iranian nation which are different than those of the Government of the Islamic Republic. This is a cautionary note, lest the actions and promises end in double frustration for the US and the Iranian nation.

Iran is a land of contrasts and contradictions. And so are its people. It would be fairly accurate to assert that the Iranian nation is the only pro-US Moslem nation in the world. (This brings to mind the impromptu processions of Iranian youth mourning the tragedy of September 11, 2001, lighting candles at the gate of the old American Embassy building in Tehran.)

The Iranians are like most other nations: a normal people that crave to become a full member of the family of nations. They want peace; seek prosperity and a good life for themselves and their children. But most importantly, they have looked up to the US as a force for good, and a possible savior, for more than a century.

On the other hand is the Government of the Islamic Republic which is apocalyptic and messianic. Its actions over the past three decades have demonstrated that the Iranian nation's wellbeing is its last priority. Unlike the people, the Government is morose, pessimistic, insecure, and power-hungry. It has taken every action possible in the past 30 years to alienate most civilized nations and make Iran a pariah state.

What cannot be overlooked by US officials contemplating negotiations with the clerics in Tehran is that the foreign policy of the theocratic state, as it stands, has been consistently incompatible with US interests. The actions of the clerical Government have had a destabilizing effect on international order, bearing in mind the clerics' consistent open and covert support for terrorist movements of all denominations, and its consistent open and covert action in attempting to destabilize (for example) the value of the US dollar.

When negotiating with Iran, it is imperative to remember this differentiation between the nation and the Government.

Today, we live in an era where there is a real world of new powers and non-state entities; and a virtual world of the Internet and the Blackberry. This new era requires a new approach.

*Realpolitik* and the old world of opaque diplomacy where deals were made with leaders at the expense of the people is over. The world has changed and today is not the era of Prince Metternich, despite the favor which Metternichian politics seems to hold for former US Secretary of State Dr Henry Kissinger and his adherent, former US National Security Advisor Gen. Brent Scowcroft.

A paradigm shift has taken place, exacerbated by the current global crisis. Even a great power like the US finds it both economically and militarily challenging to wage war and address its economic malaise at the same time. And the era of scaring or "bombing them into submission" is long gone as well. Libya was the exception; North Korea (DPRK), movements like *al-Qaida*, etc., are the rule. In this era we have seen

the revival and propagation of fundamentalist thought, of messianic zeal and suicide bombers; of improvised explosive devices and unconventional, irregular warfare.

The enemy today is stateless, or at least in many respects transnational, cloaked in a concept, which has made it much easier for rogue states the ability to project their power far from their lands.

The Islamic Administration in Iran stands on a slippery slope. The majority of its clerical hierarchy have earned their unpopularity. The lay rulers in Iran have fared no better. Given their gross mismanagement of the economy — rampant inflation, double digit unemployment, dwindling revenues — makes their situation precarious. It is fair to say that the clerical Administration has been afraid to tackle the kind of economic initiatives required to end the malaise, preferring piecemeal “band-aid” fixes to economic and social pressures.

The people, particularly the youth, are left with a feeling of hopelessness and are, as a result, restless. It is only the constant vigilance as well as the strong arm tactics of the Administration which has managed to keep them at bay. The foreign observers who have described the Administration as strong do not know the Iranian people, do not understand the society and have little in-depth knowledge of Iranian contemporary history.

If and when and the Islamic leaders finally come to the negotiating table, they will do so to get concessions. But, what will make any deal fairly short-lived is the nature of the messianic ideology of the Administration, which has been — even to the most casual observer — rigid and intransigent. This makes it highly unlikely that the clerics will have the ability or the will to change political direction. Their ideology dictates that they continue support for groups like the Palestinian HAMAS and the Lebanese *HizbAllah*. And, taking them at their word, their position on their nuclear program is non-negotiable. The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu put it well when he said that when the enemy sends an envoy to negotiate, and at the same time he continues preparations, he will advance.

The West today lives by a set of rules and standards enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Any move by the US to strike a deal for the sake of political expediency would almost certainly be seen by the US and Western electorates as negotiating away basic human rights, and would thus backfire on the US Administration.

It is obvious that Pres. Obama is faced with an economic crisis of significant magnitude, as well as diverse international political and military challenges, one of which is the enigma of the Islamic Republic.

One final reminder: The Iranian youth, some 50-million strong, are disillusioned and suffering under an increasingly erratic and unpredictable leadership. Any short-term deal with the theocrats which further compromises their future would sear into the long-term memory of the Iranian people.

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