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End of a Brief Affair? The United States and Iran

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s u m m a r y

After the September 11 attacks, relations between the United States and Iran looked more and more hopeful. The two countries' common goal of eliminating Afghanistan's Taliban seemed to be an opportunity to build on progress seen since the election of Iranian reformists.

However, President Bush's inclusion of Iran in an "axis of evil" now calls into question the likelihood of a true rapprochement. Moreover, Iranian hard-liners' growing opposition to any reconciliation with Washington, ongoing development of nuclear technology, meddling in post-Taliban Afghanistan, and relentless support for Palestinian terrorists all are stumbling blocks to improved relations.

Some security issues call for the threat of sticks, but the United States must also seek to engage Iran by offering it carrots—cooperation in Afghanistan and an end to economic sanctions, in return for a commitment by Iran's leaders to cease support for terrorism and back a two-state solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

Following the September 11 atrocities, a senior U.S. administration official declared that Iran and the United States "see the situation pretty much the same way," and thus would probably "cooperate" in the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda. This prediction soon became reality. Tehran not only contributed to the rout of the Taliban by supplying food and arms to the Northern Alliance, it also provided military advisers, some of whom probably passed their American counterparts along the road to Kabul.

These unprecedented developments seemed to presage a dramatic shift in a relationship that had seen modest improvements since Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997. Khatami repaired relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies and strengthened ties with Russia, South Asia, and Western Europe. Reform in Tehran and pragmatism abroad created the tantalizing prospect that Iran might be weaned away from its radical policies. U. S. president Bill Clinton gingerly explored this possibility by loosening economic sanctions, promoting society-to-society exchanges, and having secretary of state Madeleine Albright participate in the September 2000 "6+2 Group" talks at the United Nations, which brought Afghanistan's six neighboring states, Russia, and the United States to one table. Subsequently, George Bush's administration launched a full-scale review of United States–Iran relations, with the guiding hypothesis that the United States might best be served by replacing its "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran with a policy of renewing relations with Tehran.

Yet when President Bush named Iran in his State of the Union address as one of three states in an "axis of evil," it became clear that the advocates of rapprochement in his administration had lost what little influence they briefly wielded. This development is not a consequence of the machinations of an all-powerful anti-Iranian lobby in Washington. Rather, it is first and foremost a consequence of Iran's *domestic* politics. Not only does Iran's conservative clerical establishment energetically oppose the *very idea* of reconciliation with Washington, it also enthusiastically backs policies that threaten basic U.S. interests. Iran's development

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of nuclear technology, its expanding ballistic missile program, and most of all its relentless support of Palestinian terrorist groups all greatly reinforce the view in Washington that Iran is a "rogue state" that must be confronted rather than engaged.

That said, Bush's hard-line assertion hardly constitutes a coherent policy. It is unwise and even counterproductive for the United States to bounce from talk of cooperation with Iran to a policy of vague threats that could include anything from a military campaign to an effort to topple Tehran's clerics. Iran is not Iraq or North Korea. Although Iran is ruled by a clerical elite hostile to U.S. interests, its elected Majles (parliament) is dominated by reformists, many of whom favor rapprochement with the United States. There is little that Washington can do to openly back the reformists, but it could inadvertently harm them by adopting a bellicose position that rules out all political engagement. The challenge is to define an arena for such engagement, while making clear the costs that Iran will pay if it does not address U.S. concerns about its policies on terrorism, missiles, and nuclear technology. Whether Afghanistan can still provide such an arena is a key question.

Iran and the Taliban

There is no doubt that the war against the Taliban created new space for cooperation between the United States and Iran. Years before Washington imagined confronting the Taliban, Tehran was doing just that. Iran's policy motivations were partly religious. Iran views itself as the guardian of all Shiite Muslims. The Taliban's persecution of Hazaras (a Shiite minority forming 19 percent of Afghanistan's population), and the massacres of Pakistani Shiites (20 percent of the population), sharpened Tehran's resolve to back the Northern Alliance, and in particular Hezb-i-Wahdat (the Unity Party), a key member of the Northern Alliance.

Yet Tehran's motives also embrace vital geostrategic and economic interests. Iran's policy makers have long sought to prevent their country's "encirclement" by an alliance between Afghanistan and Pakistan dominated by Sunni Pashtuns. Moreover, the bitter struggle to control Afghanistan sapped Iran's economic, social, and human resources. From 1994 until 1998, opium smuggling across Iran's 560-mile border led to a steep increase in domestic drug addiction, while the influx of 2 million Afghan refugees imposed financial and social burdens on an economy desperately in need of structural reform.

Given these concerns, Iran readily provided military and logistical support to the Northern Alliance in the hope that it would have sufficient clout to compel Afghanistan's largest single community, Sunni Pashtuns, to share power with Shiite Hazaras, as well as Sunni Tajiks and Uzbeks (the latter two groups constitute 24 and 6 percent of the population, respectively). After the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif in September 1998, the killing of 10 Iranian diplomats, and the massacre of several thousand Hazara civilians, Tehran mobilized 200,000 soldiers along the border. War did not erupt, and Tehran resumed its efforts to promote a political settlement by joining the 6+2 Group at the September 2000 U.N. General Assembly meeting. During those discussions, Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharazi and U.S. secretary of state Albright addressed questions of human rights, terrorism, the drug trade, and Afghanistan.

Reformists versus Conservative Clerics

Given Iran's interests in Afghanistan, and in light of the Bush administration's ongoing policy review, it is not surprising that Khatami and other Iranian leaders quickly condemned the September 11 atrocities. Their genuine revulsion was combined with a keen awareness that the attacks might offer Tehran a chance to undermine its second most vexing Sunni adversary without paying a military cost. Moreover, many of Iran's foreign policy elites believed that a carefully cali-

brated policy of implicit support for the U.S. campaign might yield further dividends in the shape of better ties with Western Europe and even the United States.

Although these hopes reflected the pragmatic reckoning of Iranian foreign policy elites, they were also widely shared by the country's young people. High school and university students—frustrated by years of religious dogma and repression—had helped to propel the reformists to victory in the 2000 Majles elections. One year later, they backed Khatami's reelection despite growing frustration with his cautious leadership. This disappointment may explain why, several weeks *before* September 11, he began a campaign to regain the trust of the youth. Denouncing conservative clerics as "Talibanists," he again advanced the popular thesis that democracy in Iran required a "dialogue of civilizations" abroad. Several reformists in the Majles were inspired by his example and, seizing what seemed like a golden opportunity, formed a committee to explore possibilities for renewing relations with the United States.

Unfortunately, this bold campaign to link the reformists' domestic agenda to the question of United States–Iran relations collided with the conservative clerics' long-standing opposition to the very idea of renewing ties with the "Great Satan." These clerics, led by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, held that the very survival of the country's Islamic revolution hinged on maintaining an ideological wall between Iran and the United States. Armed with this sacred conviction, they concluded that the reformists' efforts to push for rapprochement was part of a conspiracy to destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran. Foreign Ministry officials who were aware of this backlash and were determined to avoid statements that seemed to contradict those of Khamanei walked a fine line—as did Khatami himself. While they condemned any campaign not led by the United Nations, they did little to undermine the U.S. military campaign. Tehran's offer to rescue American pilots over its territory demonstrated its resolve to reap the maximum benefits at the least cost.

Domestic events, however, soon undercut this delicate balancing act. Spectators at an international football match in Tehran—inspired by broadcasts from a Los Angeles–based satellite television station—assailed the clerics and even proclaimed their support for the exiled prince Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late shah. These anti-regime protests soon spread to other Iranian cities. Khamanei, smelling a satanic rat, declared on October 30 that "not just relations, but any negotiation with America, is against the nation's interests." Khatami fell in line, insisting that there were no "new developments between Tehran and the U.S." Iranian judiciary minister Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi then threatened to arrest any advocates of talks with the United States, thus quashing the reformists' efforts to push for reconciliation.

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Iranian Foreign Policy versus U.S. Interests

Despite a timely convergence of U.S. and Iranian interests in Afghanistan, after September 11 Tehran continued to pursue policies that conflicted with U.S. security interests.

Tehran's $7 billion arms deal with Moscow—announced on October 4, together with Russia's agreement to deliver a previously purchased nuclear reactor to Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant—is a case in point. Although officials asserted that Tehran had no intention of developing nuclear weapons, its purchase of Su-27 and Su-30 Russian jet fighters, along with the continued development of its Shihab-3 medium-range ballistic missile, elicited warnings from the White House that such weapons sales "could destabilize regional security balances or threaten U.S. allies and friends."

As this statement implies, the issue of nuclear weapons was not Washington's only worry. Its fundamental concern was and remains Tehran's support of Palestinian terrorist groups that have tried again and again to undermine every Arab–Israeli peace initiative launched by the United States. What explains Tehran's adherence to a policy that undercuts those in Washington who favor rapprochement? The answer lies in the hardline clerics' objection to the very idea of a two-state solution to the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. For Khamanei and his allies, opposition to a Jewish state on any part of "Muslim land" is as sacred to their worldview as is their devotion to the principle of an Islamic state. Support for terrorism is an outgrowth of this axiomatic position.

There is little evidence that this hardline position is popular among Iran's new generation. On the contrary, most second-generation reformists, including those with close ties to the Foreign Ministry, have argued that Iran should back a two-state solution. But given the hard-liners' power and the cycle of tit-for-tat violence in the West Bank and Gaza throughout late 2001, Iranian advocates of a policy change on the Palestinian issue had no leverage. Instead, they adhered to the Foreign Ministry's long-standing formulation: The Palestinians have a legitimate right to use violence against Israeli civilians still living or working in the Israeli–occupied territories.

This familiar Iranian distinction between legitimate and illegitimate terrorism does not resonate in Washington. Nor is the fact that Lebanon's Hezbollah aims most of its attacks at Israeli and U.S. *military* targets any consolation. Along with the bitter memories of the Americans held hostage by Hezbollah during the 1980s and the reported role played by Iranian intelligence in the 1996 bombing of the U.S. military installation in Dahran, Saudi Arabia, there is the possibility that Hezbollah might unleash Katousha rockets against Israeli *civilian* towns. Reports that Hezbollah was preparing for just such at attack one week before September 11 led Washington to send stiff warnings to Damascus and Tehran. But Tehran's most significant policy for U.S. officials turned out to be its logistical and rhetorical support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which caused complications for the White House at an unusually sensitive time—just when Washington bid to shore up its antiterrorism alliance by becoming directly involved in efforts to renew Palestinian–Israeli talks.

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From Dual Containment to Dual Rollback?

In the aftermath of September 11, Tehran's

hard-liners regained control over the two foreign policy issues of greatest concern to them: opposition to normalization of relations with the United States, and opposition to any two-state solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Now that the hard-liners are firmly in control, they are more rather than less inclined to allow the Foreign Ministry some room for maneuvering in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Iranian foreign policy is thus pursuing a two-track approach. Although the high track virtually precludes normalizing relations with the United States, the low track might allow for modest forms of cooperation in arenas such as Afghanistan.

Tehran clearly has found such cooperation both necessary and hard to swallow. After all, the new Afghan Interim Council was led by Hamid Karzai, a Sunni Pashtun notable who owes his dominant position to the patronage of the United States. Moreover, none of the council's Shiite Hazara members held a major post. Despite these drawbacks, however, Tehran not only backed the council, but in late November it also signaled its readiness to work with the new regional order by sending Foreign Minister Kharrazi to Islamabad for talks with Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf.

It is not surprising that the Bush administration at first appeared divided on how to respond to Tehran's contradictory policies. Some officials openly praised Tehran's actions in the hope that Afghanistan might provide a useful arena for testing Iranian intentions. The "handshake" between U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell and Foreign Minister Kharazi during the November 2001 U.N. General Assembly meeting, and Tehran's subsequent pledge of $560 million for Afghanistan's reconstruction, seemed to be good omens.

But hopes for engagement were all but dashed by Israel's seizure in early January of the Karine A—a ship filled with 50 tons of armaments that, according to credible intelligence sources, had been loaded by Iranians. This event confirmed the worst fears of U.S. administration hawks. They had long argued that Iran's reformists have no real power—or worse yet, that some of their leading lights, such as President Khatami himself, are using the appearance of reform to legitimize a regime sinking in economic and political quicksand. Rather than throw it a rope, the hawks held that Washington should pursue a policy of confrontation with Tehran.

Iran's rulers have sunk institutional roots far deeper than did the late shah.

Yet despite these developments, it is far from clear what President Bush means when he asserts that Iran is part of an "axis of evil." Does his administration intend to bomb Iran if it refuses to halt all nuclear technology programs or assistance to Hamas? Will it confront Iran even if such a policy encourages Tehran to pursue closer relations with Iraq, or to undermine the reconstruction of Afghanistan? What if such a policy makes it harder for reformists to counter the xenophobic, repressive policies of the conservative clerics?

It might be argued that the last question is the least critical. After all, if the clerical regime collapses, Washington's Iran problem will be solved, whereas if the clerics crush the reformists, Washington will have no reason to engage an implacably hostile regime. But such either–or thinking is faulty. To begin with, the notion that the regime will collapse is unrealistic. Iran's rulers have sunk deep institutional roots, whose durability far exceeds anything the late shah achieved.

But even though the regime will remain secure, the reformists are hardly irrelevant politically. Ayatollah Khamanei cannot give his conservative allies carte blanche to completely negate the voice of parliament without doing irreparable harm to the very legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

So the reformists will not disappear. Instead, they will continue to walk a fine line by trying to exert pressure on the hard-line clerics without provoking a decisive and final backlash. Although any overt attempt by the United States to assist the reformists will discredit them, so too will a bellicose policy that confirms the clerics' axiom that the United States is the Great Satan seeking to topple the Islamic Republic. By branding Iran an evil state that implicitly merits this fate, the Bush administration is playing directly into the hands of the hard-line clerics.

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The questions of Afghanistan and Iraq are equally tricky. From the outset of the campaign in Afghanistan, Tehran has been torn between its desire to see the Taliban destroyed and its fear that a U.S. victory would put Washington in a dominant position in the region stretching from Islamabad to Kabul. A bombing campaign in Iraq would only heighten such fears, particularly if it were followed by the introduction of U.S. ground troops to Iran's south. The recent visit of Iraqi foreign minister Naji Sabri to Tehran—during which he and Khatami called for a full resumption of peaceful relations—suggests that a policy of "dual rollback" might provoke a marriage of convenience between these two enemies.

As for Afghanistan, though Tehran has an interest in promoting the country's reconstruction, it will not cooperate under any and all circumstances. In January—following reports alleging that Iranian intelligence was assisting al Qaeda fugitives along the Iran–Afghanistan border—Iranian officials reiterated their support for Karzai's Interim Council, a message that Khatami repeated in a much publicized telephone call to the Afghan leader. Clearly, the Iranian Foreign Ministry wants to maintain Afghanistan as the one arena where it can engage Washington. But doing so will be difficult in the face of threats suggesting, by design or default, that by cooperating in Afghanistan Tehran is capitulating to Washington's dictates.

The Need for Political Engagement

Vague threats may keep Iran's leaders guessing about Washington's next move. But Tehran is unlikely to yield if not offered economic or political carrots. Moreover, it is unclear whether the administration has the *means* to compel compliance, a key point that concerns U.S. friends as much as U.S. adversaries. The U.S. administration knows that it must match rhetoric with means. Indeed, some officials are already "walking back" Bush's evil axis remark. Still missing, however, is a coherent policy delineating both the costs that Iran will pay by pursuing antagonistic policies and the benefits it will receive if it chooses a moderate course.

The United States can offer two carrots. The first is the prospect of cooperation in Afghanistan. The only effective way Iran can respond to the new geostrategic situation in

its backyard is with support for Afghanistan's reconstruction. Although Iran could stir up mischief by supporting rival warlords, Washington's alliance with Karzai means that Iran has much to lose by not cooperating. Washington should clearly (if quietly) signal Tehran that it can play a useful role in a post-Taliban Afghanistan—if Iran demonstrates in words and deeds that it will desist from aiding all terrorists.

The second carrot is economic. Despite the continued opposition of the conservative clerics to Western investment, Iran's leaders want an end to the sanctions regime. Although the Clinton administration initiated a modest loosening of the sanctions, its initiative failed because the paltry economic incentives it offered hardly compensated for the major political concessions sought from Iran.

Rather than act as if they were haggling over the purchase of a Persian carpet, Washington might offer Tehran a grand bargain: the lifting of all economic sanctions in return for Tehran's unambiguous *official* commitment to back peace between the Palestinians and Israel and to cease all support for Palestinian groups or individuals resorting to terrorism. President Khatami's November 10 interview with the *New York Times*, in which he stated that Iran would not oppose any solution acceptable to the "majority of Palestinians," was far from sufficient. Not only was it riddled with ambiguities; it was not endorsed by a single member of Iran's Foreign Ministry. For better or worse, the Iranian president does not have the power to bless the kind of exchange proposed here.

As for Iran's nuclear technology and ballistic missile program, the most effective way to get Tehran's attention is to go to the source of the problem: Moscow. Without Russia's support, it is unlikely that Iran could develop nuclear weapons or the means to deliver them. Thus Bush must press Russian president Vladimir Putin to postpone delivery of a nuclear reactor pending Iran's full cooperation with the international community. If that does not happen, Tehran may very well have to contend with the one threat that Washington can deliver on: the eventual destruction of its nuclear reactor.

A policy of political engagement is no substitute for the judicious use of threats of force. Clearly, some vital security issues cannot be addressed without raising this stick. But many others could be more effectively addressed with political and economic incentives, particularly when the United States has friends in Tehran who have put themselves on the political firing line by struggling to promote democracy at home and dialogue abroad. ■

U.S. friends in Tehran are on the political firing line for promoting democracy at home and dialogue abroad.

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Related Resources

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