

No Real Shift in U.S. Policy Towards Iran

By Karin A. Esposito and Mahdi Ahouie

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The U.S. administration says that it has shifted its policy on Iran. The U.S. has announced its readiness for direct talks with the Islamic Republic on its nuclear plans should the Iranian regime suspend its uranium enrichment. According to the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, "as soon as Iran fully and verifiably suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities, the United States will come to the table". Many in the Western media consider this a great initiative towards solving the Iranian nuclear crisis. The Iranians have announced that they will carefully consider the proposal and not rush to a decision. In the end, this deal is just another effort by the U.S. to further isolate Iran by forming an international consensus on dialogue and multi-party talks.

The idea of direct talks between Tehran and Washington is by no means a completely new initiative, as it is billed to be at present. Iran and the United States directly spoke to each other in the aftermath of the Hostage Crisis in 1981 in Algeria. In 1985-1986, the Reagan administration tried to resume direct negotiations with Iran which ended up in the scandal known as the Iran-Contra Affair¹. In 1989, George Bush I announced that his administration would welcome direct negotiations with the Iranian government, and in the 1990s, the Clinton administration also invited Iran to the negotiation table. Iran's responses to most of these calls have been negative.

Almost seventeen years ago, in a response to George Bush I, Ayatollah Khamenei said, "The Iranian nation has no need of the United States, nor is the Iranian nation afraid of the United States... We are the ones who have conditions and do not accept your behaviour, your oppression and intervention in various parts of the world." The Iranian leadership has always been concerned that any negotiations, occurring in the context of U.S. laid conditions could be used as a means of pressure on the Islamic Republic to give up its current independence from the U.S. Iranian Leader Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the first result of the talks with the United States will be "the captivity of the country" since the U.S. would not be satisfied by anything but taking a complete control over the Iranian state and making a client government in Tehran like that of the Shah prior to the Islamic Revolution. In March 2006, he emphasized, "Negotiation is a means in the hands of the United States to impose its own demands on the other side"; therefore, he concludes, "In comparison, it seems that if one stands firm against the United States, its possible consequences are much less harmful than surrendering to the U.S. oppressions."

By offering to join the nuclear negotiations, the U.S. administration kills two birds with one stone. If the negotiations succeed, the U.S. will deliver where the Europeans have failed. If Iran rejects the proposal, the U.S. will appear to have

¹ In 1985 and at the peak of Iran-Iraq war, the Reagan administration started an initiative based on selling arms to Iran in exchange of the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Despite its own arms embargo against Iran, the US government gave permission to Israel to send 504 TOW antitank missiles to Iran. In response, some of the American hostages in Lebanon were freed. The entire scheme, of course, collapsed when it was leaked to the press, allegedly by a disgruntled Iranian faction via Syrian and Lebanese intermediaries. Its unravelling caused considerable political trouble in the United States. Matters were further complicated because the Americans used excess money from Iran's payments to obtain arms for the US-backed Nicaraguan Guerrillas, the Contras.

exhausted all requirements to give diplomacy a chance before military action. Once again, all pressure is now on the Iranian side to choose the best course of action. The problem is that the U.S. proposal neglects to address the fundamental dilemma for the Iranian government: How do you negotiate with a superpower that seeks your demise? The Iranian leaders have responded that the U.S. is working on a system of “threats and bribes”. On one side of this dilemma is a government that consistently has refused to permanently stop advances in nuclear enrichment, and on the other side, there is a superpower that refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the other government. This is not the formula for successful negotiations or deal-making. Until the U.S. both clarifies its regime change policy on Iran and rules out military action as the final solution, the Islamic Republic will either lose the offered ‘incentives’ by turning down the offer of negotiation, or it will lose by negotiating with a superpower that will turn around the next day and advocate for the overthrow of the Islamic government in Iran. Both negotiating with the U.S. and confrontation with the U.S., if Iran rejects the negotiation table, will worsen U.S.-Iran relations and fuel the conservatives in Iran.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said Iran needs "to make a choice and the international community needs to know whether negotiation is a real option or not." In fact, Iran should also make sure whether the US looks at negotiations as a real option or if it still wishes to overthrow the Iranian regime. The United States must choose between negotiating with Iranian government and following a policy of regime change in Tehran. As long as the US holds its desire for a regime change in Tehran and even dedicates a budget for that purpose through the Congress, it will be very unlikely that the Iranian government would take any suggestions for direct talks with the United States seriously. The Bush administration should reconsider its policy, which professes to be initiative but is really traditional – ‘old wine in a new bottle’ at best. A real change may occur only if Washington adopts a more honest and transparent policy towards Iran.

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