

San Francisco Chronicle

Aftermath of the Bam Earthquake U.S.-Iranian relations at a crossroads

By Abbas Milani
Tuesday, January 20, 2004

Once again, the Islamic Republic of Iran is saddled with a serious political crisis; some 80 members of the parliament have staged a sit-in to protest the increasingly intolerant policies of the conservative mullahs; and once again the United States is faced with the sobering reality that it has still failed to formulate a serious strategic policy toward Iran.

There are, however, increasing signs that we are about to witness major changes in relations between the U.S. and the Islamic regime: reliable reports of secret meetings in Geneva and of a new letter from the Islamic Republic clearly outlining a path to the resumption of full diplomatic relations. In this crucial juncture, failure to formulate a correct American policy will have serious ramifications not only for the long-term interests of the United States, but for the future of democracy in Iran and the Middle East as well.

With the landslide victory of President Khatami seven years ago, the tensions between the twin legal principles shaping the Iranian Constitution --

one modern and democratic, and the other medieval and theocratic -- were exacerbated. The conservatives, with Ayatollah Khamenei the all-powerful "spiritual leader" as their ultimate source of power, thwarted every effort by Khatami to normalize ties with the United States or to establish a more democratic polity.

In the last two years, Iran's worsening economic condition, severe unemployment, rising discontent and finally the existence of more than 200,000 U.S. soldiers in Iran's neighboring countries of Iraq and Afghanistan forced even the most rabid conservatives to recognize that anti-American rhetoric and refusing to normalize U.S. relations are no longer an option. For once, the conservatives seemed cowed and unseasonably timid.

Revelations that Iran had been hiding elements of its nuclear program heightened the crisis for the mullahs. Faced with pressure even from their staunch allies in Europe -- namely France, Germany and Britain -- to come clean on the nuclear program, the mullahs, choosing a hard-line conservative spokesman, agreed to allow new, vigorous inspections of all their facilities and even offered to suspend any attempt to enrich uranium.

But the message to the world, and to the United States, seemed clear: If agreements are to be made with Iran, it is the conservatives, and not the reformist president, who must be partners to the deal.

That message has put Washington in an awkward position and might have been the source of the crisis in internal politics of Iran. Contrary to nearly all Muslim countries that make anti-Americanism a national hobby, in Iran, despite 25 years of venomous propaganda by the regime, the United States enjoys enormous popular support. Iran is also the only country in the Muslim Middle East where a viable, grassroots democratic movement has sprung. The main structural obstacle to democracy has been the conservatives' claim of divine legitimacy.

If the United States indeed makes a "deal" with the conservative bloc, damage will be twofold: On the one hand, it will forfeit its favored place in the hearts and minds of the Iranian people. Furthermore, such a "deal" will surely undermine the process of democracy that is, according to President Bush, the new cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Surely some elements of existing U.S. policy need to change, however. The economic embargo, hitherto a pillar of U.S. policy, has proved a failure, helping those it meant to punish and hurting those it wished to help. It has allowed the regime to blame the United States and the embargo for the economic problems that are the direct result of the regime's corruption and mistakes. Finally, it keeps U.S. companies from participating in Iran and gives Europe a politically privileged position as well.

Ending the embargo must, however, come with stern warnings to the conservatives that the United States will not negotiate with those who refuse to heed their people's legitimate call for democracy. The future of Iran, and its long-cherished hope of democracy, must be determined inside Iran. But the United States can play a crucial role by siding with the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. In democracy, we have the one point at which the interests of the Iranian people, the strategic interests of the United States and the wishes of the Iranian diaspora community converge.

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