

## Getting Iran Right This Time Around

Abbas Milani

Dear President Obama: Congratulations on winning a second term. Iran, as you have often said, will present a major challenge to your foreign policy in the coming months.

Two follies have long haunted US policy on Iran. Some critics of the Islamic regime have offered “no negotiation with the regime” as policy. The other side is the view that just negotiating with the regime is the panacea for the nuclear issue, and also for an end to all the regime’s shenanigans. And if past attempts at negotiation have not worked, it is only because American policy makers have not tried hard enough.

The second folly has been the view that “solving” the nuclear impasse should be the sole goal of US policy. This view misjudges the nature of the regime by assuming that it will actually abide by any promises it makes. This is a regime that has broken virtually every promise it made to its own people, one whose theology is founded on the notion of Tagiyeh—where an expedient lie to “infidels” is the duty of the Shiite faithful. Focusing only on the nuclear issue has played into the hands of the regime, allowing it to rally nationalist sentiments, and shifting the focus of US policy away from the no less important issues of human rights and democracy in Iran.

For almost two decades, Ayatollah Khamenei has said that America’s “soft power” and its “culture war”—the power of its ideas, its defense of the right of religious freedoms for all Iranians, whether of Bahai faith, or Muslims wishing to convert to other religions, equality for women, and the power of its information technology to breaking what you called a new Iron Curtain of ideas—is the most serious threat to his regime. And for almost as long, the US has surprisingly not fully played in the field the regime is in fact most vulnerable.

Carrying the anti-American and anti-Israeli banner had been the sole tool of the Shiite, non-Arab clerics of Iran to claim the mantle of leadership of the proverbial Arab or Muslim Street. Another obstacle to serious negotiations with the US has been the IRGC’s realization that tensions with America have been instrumental in its success in becoming an economic and political juggernaut, dominating directly or indirectly an estimated sixty to seventy percent of the economy.

But in spite of the regime’s designs and desires, the regime is left with little alternative but to negotiate with the US. For America, the policy foundation of any negotiations should be that only a more democratic, transparent and law-abiding power in Iran can solve the nuclear issue. I know you have long believed that the US can’t, and should not, export democracy to Iran; but it is no less true that America can help create a more favorable context for transition to democracy. Another corollary to this policy is that military action on Iran to retard the regime’s nuclear program will be the best gift to the troubled Islamic regime. Its recent bellicosity in claiming to “hunt down” at least three US drones is sure proof that at least some in the regime are pining for such an attack.

This is an unsettling time for Iran’s rulers. Externally, there is the challenge posed by the Arab Spring, the relative popularity of the Turkish model of Islamic governance, and the imminent fall of the Assad regime in Syria. There are troubles at home as well – double digit inflation in the range of 25 percent last month, massive unemployment between 25 and 30 percent, the fall of the Iranian currency, and rivalries at the height

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of the political order between Khamenei and Rafsanjani, and between Khamenei and his hand picked man, President Ahmadinejad. If a few months ago, talk of direct negotiations with the US was strictly taboo, today there are open hints at the regime's eagerness to engage in such negotiations. In spite of its bravura, the regime desperately needs a respite from the sanctions. Prudent policy will be not to miss the opportunity to negotiate with the regime; but it will be a new folly if the US believes the tactical retreats by the regime and forfeits the strategic idea that only a democratic Iran can offer the kind of transparency that will convince the international community about the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. A democratic Iran, more than simply "normalized" relations with the regime based on promises about the nuclear program, can become an enduring cherished legacy of your second term.

*Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.*

*This post is part of The Caravan, a periodic discussion on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. Other commentary in this symposium on Obama's Second Term – Middle Eastern Memos is provided by Russell Berman, Itamar Rabinovich, Charles Hill, Robert Satloff, Asli Aydintasbas, Habib Malik, Reuel Gerecht, Leon Wieseltier, Tammy Frisby, and Fouad Ajami.*

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