

On Iran, Begin with the End in Mind

By Trita Parsi and Stanley A. Weiss

Only 15 minutes into his term as president, Barack Obama did what his predecessor had refused to do for eight years. He reached out to Iran. By calling for a new approach to the Muslim world based on "mutual respect," Obama signaled Tehran that a new dawn in U.S.-Iran relations may be in reach.

His outreach was stronger and swifter than many had expected. It was a wise move, but there should be little surprise that Tehran has yet to fully respond. It won't. While small steps like these are necessary to set the stage for diplomacy with Iran, they will not break the gridlock between the two countries. To get the Iranians to respond, Obama must start with the end in mind.

The temptation to begin small with confidence-building measures only and without a clarification of America's long-term objectives must be resisted. Due to the history of U.S.-Iran relations, small tactical steps won't work.

Indeed, the tactical route has been tried -- and has failed -- repeatedly. Tehran cooperated with Washington in forging the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan partly in hopes of a strategic shift in U.S.-Iranian relations. The Bush administration, however, had no interest in any such shift and branded Iran part of the "axis of evil."

More recently, after Washington insisted on keeping U.S.-Iranian talks on Iraq at the ambassadorial level, with no broader strategic dimension, Tehran resisted any further tactical cooperation, determined not to be taken advantage of again.

Tehran has used these encounters to test whether the U.S. is prepared to renounce external regime change and accept Iran's legitimate security interests and role as a regional power. But the Iranians have learned a lesson from these experiences -- Washington is something like an estranged relative: it's not interested in getting back together and only calls when it wants something.

Seeing no larger American plan for reconciliation -- Obama's outreach and respectful tone notwithstanding -- Tehran therefore resists any tactical reduction of tensions. Tehran is capable of securing its interests in Afghanistan and Iraq without the U.S., and feels no need to be helpful unless Washington is willing to reciprocate at the strategic level.

The Obama administration must decide on its end game -- its vision of Iran's role in the Middle East -- and then, in a truly grand confidence-building measure, clearly communicate this end game to Tehran. In this sense, President Obama would be adapting a habit of highly effective diplomacy -- beginning with the end in mind.

Washington's vision for Iran should include the obvious: that Tehran respects the human rights of its citizens, that Iranian-backed organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas and Shiite militias in Iraq renounce violence and that Iran accept intrusive inspections of its nuclear activities to prevent any potential weaponization program.

To make this vision sustainable, however, Washington must accept that Iran, like any other nation, has legitimate security interests warranting an Iranian role in regional security architecture commensurate with its geopolitical weight.

Iran's regional role cannot be a negligible one. Whether Washington or the Sunni Arab states of the Middle East like it or not, Shiite Persian Iran, by virtue of its history, geography, population, religion and energy resources, has always been and will always be a regional power. Attempts at containing Iran, which is not a member of any legitimate regional security organization, have only encouraged Tehran to seek regional influence through illegitimate means.

To whom in Tehran should the Obama administration convey its vision for Iran? During the presidential campaign, Obama said he would reach out to "the appropriate Iranian leader at a time and place of my choosing." That leader is not the hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who controls Iran's military and foreign policy. Through intermediaries, Obama should convey Washington's intentions to Khamenei, a sign of the trust that will be necessary for any successful diplomacy.

Washington could learn from the wisdom of Moshe Dayan, Israel's legendary soldier and foreign minister. When negotiating with Egypt in the late 1970s, Dayan didn't start with tactical cooperation. Instead, he focused on something Egypt wanted. He declared his intent to return the Sinai to Egypt and challenged the Egyptians to help find a way to realize that vision. He succeeded, and 30 years later, Israel's peace with Egypt remains intact.

In contrast, the process of implementing the Oslo accords -- more than a decade's worth of attempts at confidence building without addressing final status of the Palestinians -- has left the Israelis and Palestinians with neither peace nor security.

President Obama, please take note. Don't simply begin talks with Iran, begin with the end in mind, including a Middle East vision that includes Iran.

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