

The Future of US-Iran Relations

By Haytham Mouzahem

Twenty-five years since the rupture of US-Iran relations, it appears that reestablishment of relations will not occur anytime soon. There are numerous impediments preventing the normalization of relations between both countries. One main obstacle to reestablishing relationship with Iran is the US State Department's concern about what it calls "Iran's support of terrorism," particularly anti-Israel groups. Another is the US claim of Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The United States is unlikely to lift sanctions against Iran unless it believes that Iran has ceased all activities in the aforementioned areas. Despite continuing strained relations, the United States continues willingness to engage in discussions with top Iranian officials.

Groups such as AIPAC (American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee) hold the opinion that Iran's support of anti-Israel groups merits the continuation of sanctions. Senator Alfonse D'Amato (New York) introduced the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Act in January of 1995. In his May 1995 Executive Order 12959, Clinton banned all US trade with Iran.

The United States is not alone as it faces internal difficulties preventing broad movement toward reconciliation. Hard-liners or conservatives within the Iranian political system refuse the normalization of relations with the United States while the reformists such as Iranian president Muhammad Khatami cannot afford to embrace the US too warmly for fear of being labeled as tools of the US by their rivals.

Despite these divisions, the reformists in Iran and the US State department, encouraged by the oil and agriculture companies who have economic interests in the reestablishment of relations, have tried to bridge the gap between the two countries. For example, Secretary Madeleine Albright and President Bill Clinton made a point to hear President Khatami of Iran's address to the UN during the millennial summit. In addition, when Iran's Foreign Minister Kharazmi was in the states, he met with Albright as well as several members of the United States Congress.

Though AIPAC was at the time advocating steps to bar third-country trade with Iran, Clinton did not go that far. Since then the administration has relaxed sanctions on Iran to exclude the import of luxury items such as pistachios, carpets, and caviar. The US stated that it has made overtures towards Iran, but has not had positive response. In March of 2000, Albright spoke in front of the American-Iranian Council and mentioned that the US was wrong to support the coup against pro-democracy Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1954. The State Department maintains that it has not received a parallel response to this overture. Until the reformists gain more power, they are not at liberty to take such steps. It is unlikely then that the hard-liners would change their stance.

The White House made several efforts in 1999 and 2000 to demonstrate its interest in opening a dialogue with Tehran by sending New Year's greetings, making partial apologies for imagined wrongdoings, and by eliminating some trade sanctions. Some members of Congress, furthermore, actually met with their Iranian counterparts and voiced their support for renewed relations. Tehran responded that these American gestures should be realized in actions especially that the US lift its sanctions and stop its hostility to the Islamic regime and its accusations and attempts to overthrow it. Representative Tom Lantos (Democrat, CA) said that Tehran has failed to reciprocate gestures made by the Clinton administration: lifting the trade ban against Iranian caviar, nuts, and carpets. Lantos said that "the United States reached out an open hand, only to be met with a clenched fist." Lantos, a leading member of the House International Relations Committee, said that he would support the renewal in August of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which calls for sanctions against firms that invest more than \$20 million a year in

Iran's oil and gas sector. Speaking at the same event, Senator Arlen Specter (Republican, PA) predicted that ILSA would be renewed. Earlier in the week, Rep. Henry Hyde (Republican, IL) said he would push for renewal of ILSA.

On 13 March 2002 President George W. Bush signed an order renewing the ban on trade and investment with Iran pending an overall review of the policy, saying that the Islamic republic continued to pose a threat to U.S. interests. The measures were imposed by former President Bill Clinton in 1995. .

From the Iranian point view, the main barriers to normalization are US sanctions on Iran, the freezing of Iranian assets in the US since 1979, as well as the US accusations of "terrorism" supported by Iran.

Iran's representative to the UN, Hadi Nejad-Husseinian, described the "historic victimization" of Iran by the U.S. He said that U.S. policy has been designed to "undermine [Iran's] national security and limit its capability for progress and development through every conceivable means.". But he added "the past should not dictate the future, he said, and both sides should try to heal such wounds".

Nejad-Husseinian said that the Bush renewal of trade sanctions against Iran was "disappointing," but Tehran notes other statements and signals and regards them with "cautious optimism." Any change in the relationship, Nejad-Husseinian added, must be initiated by "a major overhaul of the U.S. perception of Iran and subsequently of the U.S. policy toward Iran." As for the U.S. call for direct negotiations about Iranian opposition to the Middle East peace process, support for terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction proliferation, "it is not realistic." Washington should be more concerned about Israel's weapons of mass destruction and "state terrorism," Nejad-Husseinian declared.

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi also discussed Iran's expectations of the new U.S. administration in interviews that appeared in the 21 March 2001. He said that it is too early to judge the Bush administration because it is reviewing its policies, but "the previous administration's experience and failures might give a lesson to this administration." Not only did the U.S. fail to boycott or isolate Iran successfully, he said, "U.S. corporations panted after Iran." Kharrazi said that Tehran welcomes the policy review, but "the problem is that the American side has so far continued to follow a hostile policy. If it changes its policy, we have no problem."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi said that the Clinton administration's policies towards Iran "failed because they were not based on realities." He went on to say that the Bush administration should base its policy on past experiences with Iran. Assefi said the priorities of the Bush and Clinton administrations differ, but the Bush White House should have the courage to act on its judgments. Reacting later to the renewal of sanctions, Assefi suggested that "the American government should learn from its failed

policies and give up behavior contrary to international regulations." According to Assefi, "American companies are the ones losing the most from such sanctions."

Assefi also said that Secretary of State Colin Powell has misunderstood internal political forces in Iran. Powell came in for renewed criticism from Tehran after he told a meeting of the American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) that Washington is watching efforts in Iran to change the political system, and he also expressed concern about Iran's support for terrorism and weapons proliferation. Iran said that this statement derives from "the Zionists' influence over the American foreign policy apparatus."

All these statements are clearly intended for public consumption. The Iranian and American sides have cooperated in overthrowing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, as well as dealing with the Iraqi regime. But continuing deep differences over Iranian support for

terrorism, pursuit of WMD, and opposition to the Middle East peace process make any reconciliation anytime soon unlikely.

Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, Iran was cautiously positive to the invasion—in favor of regime change in Baghdad but also concerned that Iran might be the next target.

Statements from high-ranking Iranian officials, both conservative and reformist, sought constantly to assert Iran's refusal to back any attack on Iraq despite the many conflicts between the two countries and regardless of Tehran's deep seated hatred for the Baghdad regime. Thus, Iranian officials categorically rejected 'regime change' through foreign military intervention. In actuality, however, the wounds of the longstanding conflict between Iran and Iraq ran much deeper than the official position would admit and Iran did not rule out limited military cooperation with the US to topple the Iraqi regime.

Tehran sent a message of goodwill to the US when it allowed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), led by Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim, to send a high-ranking delegation to Washington in order to participate in the meetings in early August. SCIRI's attendance was made possible only after the direct and personal authorization of Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei. Tehran and Washington have

also kept up a quiet dialogue regarding the war on Iraq through the British government, which has been acting as an intermediary.

After the occupation of Iraq, Iranian troops intervened immediately by attacking the bases of Mujahedeen e-Khalq, an Iranian military opposition movement based in and supported by Iraq and designated a terrorist organization by the United States. Iran also backed its allies in the Iraqi Islamic opposition—mainly SCIRI and its armed wing, the Badr Brigades. After its occupation of Iraq, however, the US warned Iran of intervening in Iraqi affairs and suddenly brought a barrage of accusations against it, which included Iranian hosted military operations on Iraqi territories and harboring members and leaders of al-Qaeda. Tehran rejected these allegations and stated that the Americans simply wanted Iran under pressure in order to prevent it from playing any substantive role in the post- Saddam Iraq..

Hence, Washington and Tehran held secret talks in Geneva in April 2003 in order to ease the tension between them. Sources close to the Iranians reported that the American officials did not want to negotiate or discuss issues with their Iranian counterparts but simply wanted to have their demands met, the first of which stated that Iran should not intervene in the Iraqi war and reconstruction. Iran has run into troubles since the invasion, with the US raising concerns about its nuclear power program as well as alleging Iranian support for al-Qaeda. In July 2003, Iran publicly acknowledged that it was holding senior al-Qaeda in custody. Government representatives explained that those members of al-Qaeda who had committed crimes in Iran would be prosecuted by Iranian courts while others would be extradited to "friendly countries" with which Iran has extradition treaties—that rules out the US on two counts. As for Washington's accusations that Iran

is running a clandestine nuclear weapons program, Iran insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful electrical power purposes and has said that it would agree to unfettered inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provided that it is granted access to advanced nuclear technology as provided for under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Tehran also claims that Washington is using its influence to block such technology transfer.

The US has intensified its accusations against Iran in recent months, focusing on Iranian support of terrorist groups and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, particularly its nuclear program. It is likely that the US will continue its pressure on Iran in order to hinder of playing a role in Iraq post Saddam and to push her to waive her hostility towards Israel and the peace process in the Middle East.

Support for Hizbullah

However, Tehran have tended to enter into alliance the Lebanese Hizbullah organisation and Syria. There are significant differences in the nature of Syrian and Iranian support for Hizbullah and its armed wing, the Islamic Resistance. While Iran has no political, tactical or strategic need for Hizbullah to continue to function as a resistance movement, Syria does. Consequently, Iran has shown far less interest than Syria in supporting the Islamic Resistance in its struggle against Israeli forces in the Shebaa Farms area. In the two years preceding Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Iranian officials repeatedly stated that Tehran would accept the transformation of Hizbullah into a political party and the demobilisation of its military forces if only Israel were to withdraw from occupied land.

Iran has none of these particular tactical, political and strategic concerns yet it pays a large part of the political price — including looming confrontation with the USA — because of its support for Hizbullah. Iranian support seems predicated on two main factors: widespread support for Hizbullah among the Iranian population and an ideological determination within the Iranian leadership to not 'sell out' their Lebanese allies, especially not as a result of US pressure. Thus, Tehran's acceptance of Hizbullah's right to choose to demobilise does not mean that its support is about to ebb away. Iran remains Hizbullah's main financial and material backer while Syria is not known to have supplied the movement with either funds or military ordnance in the last decade, but merely facilitates Iranian support. A particularly clear example of this tripartite dynamic was provided by the reaction to then Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin

Netanyahu's 'Lebanon first' proposal in 1998, the idea of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the south of the country. Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharazi responded by declaring that Hizbullah's resistance is a response to Israel's occupation and that the party will end its military activities when Israel ends its occupation.

Bam earthquake

U.S. relief efforts in the aftermath of the Dec. 26 2003 Bam earthquake people seemed to have prompted something of a thaw in the frosty relationship between Washington and Tehran. President George W. Bush praised Iran's willingness to accept U.S. humanitarian flights into the country but sought to keep pressure on Tehran by urging it to abandon nuclear weapons and turn over suspected al Qaeda militants.

"The Iranian government must listen to the voices of those who long for freedom, must turn over al Qaeda (members) that are in their custody and must abandon their nuclear weapons program," Bush said. "In the mean time, we appreciate the fact the Iranian government is willing to allow our humanitarian aid flights into their country," he said. "And it's a good thing to do. It's right to take care of people when they hurt, and we're doing that."

Bush two years ago branded Iran as part of an "axis of evil" along with prewar Iraq and North Korea.

In one possible sign, Bush ordered an easing of some sanctions on Iran to speed the flow of humanitarian relief for victims of the earthquake in which up to 50,000 people may have been killed.

Washington has approached Iran about sending a high-level humanitarian mission to Tehran headed by U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, a North Carolina Republican, and including an unspecified member of the Bush family. The mission would have to be the first public U.S. official visit since the 1979-81 hostage ordeal, when Iranian students held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. Iran and the United States have not had formal diplomatic ties for more than two decades.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said at that month he saw "encouraging" signs from Iran that might lead to an opening up of a dialogue but he said, "We still have concerns."

Bush said it was his "hope" Tehran would address Washington's concerns.

"And as well, it's very important for them to listen to those voices in their country who are demanding freedom," he

said. "And we stand strongly with those who demand freedom."

Iranian officials on Thursday welcomed America's temporary lifting of sanctions against Iran following the country's earthquake, but the foreign minister said the embargo should end permanently.

Kamal Kharrazi, the foreign minister, and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani said the lifting of sanctions for a 90-day period would help improve Iranian-U.S. relations, which have been severed since the 1979 U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in the capital, Tehran. "Even if the lifting of sanctions for 90 days is temporary, it's still a positive step," Kharrazi said during an interview conducted in Tehran with state-run radio. He said the move would enable "Iranian expatriates in the U.S. ... (to) send cash to help their countrymen who have been affected by the earthquake." But Kharrazi added that America should not reimpose the sanctions, saying "the permanent lifting of sanctions by

the United States will open a new chapter in mutual relations."

The United States lifted the sanctions temporarily, a day after the 6.6-magnitude quake struck the ancient city of Bam, situated in Kerman province. The move was made to permit Americans to donate funds to private organizations to be used for relief and reconstruction efforts, the U.S. Treasury office said.

Along with the sanctions lifting, the U.S. Agency for International Development has sent 84 experts, including 60 Boston-area physicians and other medical workers, to provide relief services in Bam. Former Iranian president Rafsanjani told Tehran radio that the United States has been "showing some positive signals" in recent months toward improving relations with Iran. Asked if these signals could mean improved Iran-U.S. relations, he said: "I am not sure but the signals point in that direction."

President Mohammad Khatami's brother went further, implying the U.S. response to the earthquake might win an unspecified reciprocal gesture from Iran. "We're evaluating the American government's positive behaviour and I'm sure that goodwill will be answered with goodwill," Mohammad Reza Khatami, deputy parliament speaker and Khatami's younger brother..

Secretary of State Colin Powell consulted members of Congress and concluded that the earthquake had created extraordinary humanitarian needs and that it was in the U.S. national interest to provide help, deputy White House press secretary Trent Duffy said in a statement. "The Iranian people deserve and need the assistance of the international community to help them recover from the catastrophic results of last week's earthquake," Duffy said. "The American people want to help, and share great concern and sympathy for those families and individuals who lost loved ones, their homes and possessions."

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage placed a phone call to Iran's U.N. envoy, Javad Zariv, who was in Tehran at the time of the tragedy, and pledged U.S. assistance in light of the disaster. But while Zariv accepted the offer and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami thanked the United States, Khatami said there could be no change in a nearly 25-year estrangement with the United States unless Washington changed its tone and behavior.

Within the Bush administration there continues to be disagreement on how to deal with Iran and on whether democratic change is in the wind in Tehran. Powell told The Washington Post earlier in the week that there were encouraging developments in Iran and that Tehran was demonstrating a "new attitude" on some issues. Duffy, accompanying President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, cast a different spin. "We've made clear to the Iranian government on many occasions our grave concerns regarding its support for terrorism, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and other of its activities," Duffy said.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said he sees no change in the U.S.-Iranian estrangement unless Washington changes its tone and behavior.

Iran itself indicated a change in behavior last month when, under heavy international pressure, it agreed to allow surprise international inspections of its nuclear facilities. Secretary of State Colin Powell, alluding to that development and others, said it suggested a new Iranian attitude on certain issues.

But Iranian State Radio, in a commentary said the United States was using earthquake aid to create divisions in Iran. "The Americans, by publicizing their aid to Iran, have ineptly tried to implement their duplicitous policy of creating a rift between the Iranian nation and government," the radio said, adding that "our people's solidarity" will stop that from happening.

Iranian radio said recent conciliatory remarks from top U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, were aimed at concealing Washington's anti-Iran policies at a time when the world's attention is focused on the devastation from the quake. "One should therefore not trust the expression of opinion, speeches and other optimistic signals that are sent by the American foreign policy authorities toward Iran from time to time," the radio said. Instead of sending "meager aid" to help the quake victims, Washington should unfreeze billions of dollars of Iranian assets, the radio commentary said.

A leading Iranian cleric said he believed the United States was trying to exploit the Bam earthquake for political gain and applauded what he called a "slap in the face" given to Washington by the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of Iran's powerful supervisory body the Guardian Council, told worshippers at weekly prayers that Iran was grateful for the foreign aid pouring in to help victims of last week's quake that killed at least 30,000. Jannati said, Iran would not tolerate any meddling after U.S. officials expressed interest in better relations. "Naturally America wanted to take advantage of this situation by offering some help and bringing up the issue of relations," Jannati said. "It was given a slap in the face," he told worshippers to chants of "Death to America". But Jannati, whose views reflect hardliners believed to be close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said: "All their moves are political and now they offer help -- politically."