

Engaging Iran

Peter Jones

The election of Barack Obama increases the chances that there will be a broad-based direct dialogue between the United States and Iran for the first time since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It does not guarantee that talks will take place, of course. We do not yet know whether the Iranian side will accept Obama's apparent willingness to begin a broad dialogue without preconditions. Moreover, as Obama indicated during a recent press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the president's offer of dialogue is not without a time limit. Nor does the existence of a dialogue, important though it would be, guarantee that the many issues dividing the US and Iran can be resolved satisfactorily.

If there is to be a US-Iran dialogue, however, some basic issues and questions arise. One of these concerns is: Which Iran – and which Iranians – will be part of the dialogue?

The Iranian body politic is extraordinarily diffuse. There are many power centres and players, and they are often locked in an intense competition. Western analysts sometimes refer to the various groups comprising Iran's political spectrum as reformists, traditional conservatives, techno-conservatives, radicals and so on. But in reality the situation is very fluid, with coalitions forming and re-forming around different issues. Indeed, the very concept

At a glance...

- *The election of Barack Obama greatly increases the chances of a comprehensive Iran-US dialogue, but it remains uncertain if such a dialogue will actually begin.*
- *If talks start, outside actors will need to understand the distinctive characteristics of Iranian negotiating behaviour, which reflect complex social and historical approaches to interpersonal relationships in Iranian society.*
- *The worst case scenario of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would be a serious development, but a nuclear-armed Iran is not imminent and could be deterred.*
- *There may be some scope for discussions about "limits" on Iran's fuel cycle activities, but such approaches must avoid creating the impression that Iran is "caving in" to the West or they will be rejected by Iranian political and religious leaders.*

of a “spectrum” may be inappropriate because it implies a fairly logical progression of ideas and concepts. Further, the groups and coalitions that make up Iran’s body politic are often formed based on personal politics and histories, and not just ideological differences.

In all my time in Iran, I have rarely heard Iranians refer to their country’s different factions as reformists, radicals, conservatives, and so on. Their understanding of their own political spectrum did not accord with our own. Rather than a spectrum, Iranian politics might be better conceived as a web of interlocking relationships that often cuts across ideological lines.

The President of Iran (currently Mahmoud Ahmedinijad) is far from the most important figure, whatever his political rhetoric might suggest. To be sure, the Supreme Leader is the key figure, but even he is not all powerful as a political actor in the Iranian system. Instead, he has proven over several years to be the master of an ongoing balancing act in which he tries to avoid coming down too heavily on one side or another, though it is generally assumed that his sympathies lie with those who we would call the “conservative” factions.

With these observations as a starting point, anyone talking to or negotiating with Iranians should keep the following key points in mind:

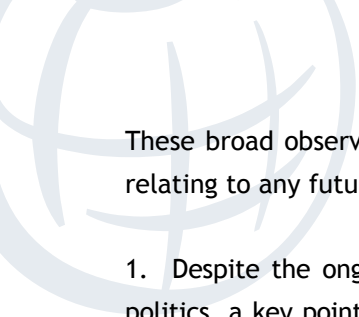
1. Iran’s culture of discussion is complex and formal. It includes a system of elaborate, formal language which is used to establish pecking orders and to pass unspoken messages. Critically, concealment and dissimulation are part of this, and are not considered negative behaviour, but a form of self-defence. One also notes an elaborate, somewhat academic approach to things. Iranians like to construct elaborate models and put ideas into complex conceptual and historical frameworks. They talk in broad terms of ideas such as “justice” and “respect,” but can be reticent in defining what these mean in practical terms – beyond broad claims that the West has generally been “unjust” in its dealings with Iran and has lacked “respect” for Iranian culture.

These characteristics can lead to long discussions about the meaning of terms and the like, but such discussions are necessary and important. One’s credibility is established over time through debate and intellectual discussion – arguing, disagreeing, making your point and insisting that Iranian interlocutors link their broad ideas to specific instances. Iranians respect outsiders who do this. But it takes time to build a relationship in which you can disagree with their ideas and models, even as you respect them and they respect you.

It can thus be very frustrating to deal with the Iranians, but Westerners need to recognise that our (and especially American) ways of talking – blunt, direct, transactional – can be deeply frustrating and annoying to Iranians. They have difficulty believing that our way of discussion is not somehow intended to conceal something or put them at disadvantage in some way by depriving the discussion of contextual factors that they value and depend upon to situate and assess ideas that are in play.

2. Iranians are also, understandably, very proud of their history and culture. This tendency may exist because their history tells the Iranians, with some justification, that the outside world is a source of threat and does not appreciate Persian culture. It also tells them that compromise with the outside world has often been a prelude to long periods of domination. Self-reliance and toughness are critical attributes, both in politics internally and in Iranian diplomacy.

3. Relatedly, Iranians are also enormously sensitive to losing face. As a result, any real solutions to diplomatic differences, if they can be found, will have to be framed in such a way as to allow them to claim that they did not “cave in” to outsiders. In terms of their pride, and also of survival in the vicious world of internal Iranian politics, walking away from a good deal which makes you look weak is far preferable to accepting it. Of course, this reality can be used as a bargaining chip by Iranians to put pressure on the other side, but even though it may be used as a tactic, the threat to walk away may also be real.



These broad observations lead, in turn, to six points relating to any future dialogue with Iran:

1. Despite the ongoing infighting that marks Iranian politics, a key point for Westerners to bear in mind is that all factions in “mainstream” Iranian politics support the idea that Iran should master nuclear enrichment and develop a nuclear “option”. The different factions may have differing views on what constitutes an option and what can be traded for it. This may be an area for discussion. But the idea that Iran should have some form of nuclear fuel cycle commands broad consensus across the current political system. It is not a matter of waiting for the present political order to throw up a leader who sees this differently because, to put it bluntly, that is not going to happen.

2. Outsiders should not make the dialogue exclusively about the nuclear issue. There are many other things that need to be discussed. Those on both sides who seek to make the nuclear question the only issue, and the one that must be addressed before anything else can be considered, are not serious. This need to address other matters, even as the nuclear question is discussed, may have the effect of playing into Iran’s hands as to the timing of their nuclear programme, but it is a reality anyway. This is not an attempt to say that the nuclear issue is unimportant, or should be shelved. It is a way of saying that no relationship is one-dimensional. Afghanistan, Iraq, drug smuggling and others are issues where there can be some common purpose. There are also issues where there are significant differences, such as Iranian support for Hamas, Hezbollah, etc. All of this will have to be on the table.

3. A US or Israeli attack on Iran would be the greatest gift that could be bestowed upon the hardliners – it would be the gift that keeps on giving. Nothing could more effectively unite the people behind a government that is in many other respects quite unpopular. If an attack could be guaranteed to destroy Iran’s nuclear programme, it may be worth considering, but this is an unlikely outcome. The Iranians are likely to have dispersed and hidden critical elements of the

programme. An attack may “set back” the Iranian nuclear programme, but by how much? Insofar as we are not sure where they are in terms of their nuclear programme, we cannot be sure how effective a strike would be. This is a bad set of conditions under which to consider such a risky move.

4. There is a need to do some hard thinking about what a dialogue would look like. My own view is that it will be a multi-faceted, multi-track dialogue. There will be important elements of Track Two, Track 1.5 and so on, even as official discussions seek to begin, however tentatively. This raises the danger or confusion, either unintentional or because the Iranian side will think that it is able to play different dialogues off against each other – something they are quite good at doing. A degree of discipline is thus desirable between the tracks in order to make clear that unofficial discussion is all well and good as a mechanism for building relationships and exploring ideas, but that only official discussions can make decisions. Some might say that Track Two should bow out as soon as official discussions get going, but this would be a mistake. In addition to its critical role in allowing a more fulsome exploration of ideas than Track One can sometimes entertain, Track Two is necessary to help prepare publics on both sides for changes in policies.

5. This will be a long process. There will be spoilers on both sides, people who do not want dialogue to succeed and who are very good at what they do. Be prepared and carry on.


6. There is a need on the US side to recognise that a dialogue leading to improved relations means the eventual abandonment of one of the few remaining central tenets of the Iranian Revolution. For them, this business of really talking to the US is about more than cutting deals; it is about changing the fundamental definition of their society. They need time to frame it in a way which appears to not be a loss, even though it is. I believe they will go this way eventually, because the Iranian people want it and are tired of being isolated, especially from the US.

As a final point – and this may be heretical – there is a need to keep a sense of proportion. Iran does not pose an existential threat to the US, or yet to Israel for that matter. Even if Iran develops the option to build a nuclear weapon at some point in the future, it can be deterred. Rhetoric aside, Iran has pursued a largely rational policy over many years in regard to basic matters of regime survival. Put simply, the Iranian leadership believes that martyrdom is an honour best bestowed on others. In many ways, the Pakistani and North Korean bombs pose as much or a greater danger of being used for irrational reasons, or having a bomb (or radioactive material) fall into dangerous hands through political instability, as does the prospect of an Iranian one.

This is not to say that we should be sanguine about the prospects of Iran achieving this capability. We should not. It would be extremely negative for the world, for the region and for Iran. If it can be forestalled, including by the creative use of a combination of engagement and sanctions, that should be tried. But we should, even as we keep trying to get them off this course, think a bit about the worst outcome and recognise that the sun will still come up the morning after. If such an outcome does spur the prospect of a Middle East with multiple nuclear players, that outcome is even further down the road than a nuclear Iran is. It is worth remembering that, if not for the Revolution, Iran would likely be a nuclear power today.

Too often we make the mistake of thinking that deterrence cannot work because their values appear quite alien to ours. But deterrence is not about values; it is about what they value. During the Cold War many neo-cons made an argument that nuclear war was possible because the Soviet leadership placed a different value on human life and would not have hesitated to use nuclear weapons if it had to. This was a false proposition. The Soviet leadership may have valued life less than we did, but the key was that they valued their lives and the continuation of their system enough to be deterred. I think Iran may prove to be the same.

This suggests that a backing off of the apocalyptic rhetoric about this issue may be wise, because if we establish as an irretrievable bottom line the notion that we cannot live with a nuclear Iran, but are eventually proved not to be able to stop it, where does that leave us? How credible will we be then, when we most need to be?

To conclude, I return to the question posed earlier about the possibility that there may be different views in Iran as to what may constitute an acceptable nuclear option and whether there is any leeway here to construct a viable deal. Is it a zero-sum game as regards the nuclear fuel cycle? What inducements (and sticks in the way of sanctions) can be offered by a new Administration to get the idea of a consortium going? 

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