



Obama's Diplomacy with Iran and the 2009 Election Scandal

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The conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran has haunted the Middle East for more than three decades. During this period, both sides have rarely missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. When one is ready to dialogue, circumstances in the other country disables it from coming to the table.

To make matters worse, opportunities for dialogue have been few and short-lived. And few if any of the efforts had an explicit and public strategic dimension. The outreach has been tactical and very fragile - the slightest negative development could derail the entire process.

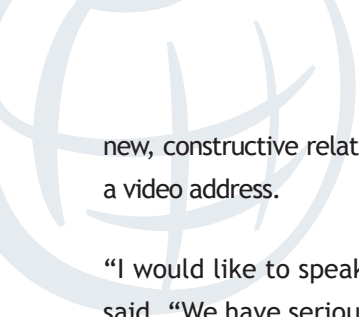
Though Obama's attempt at diplomacy with Iran broke several of the past patterns of US-Iran outreach, it nevertheless suffered from significant domestic political constraints and proved ultimately to be very vulnerable and short on persistence. One unforeseen development, in particular, the Iranian election scandal of the summer of 2009, had a very severe and negative impact on the administration's political space to pursue talks and its moral comfort with diplomacy.

At a glance...

- *Barack Obama's presidency began with a limited but genuine diplomatic outreach to Iran.*
- *However, the space for diplomacy turned out to be limited, due in part to the effects of Iran's fraudulent 2009 elections and related.*
- *The Obama administration consequently abandoned its plan for renewed dialogue with Iran, but in doing so it revealed a lack of patience: the diplomatic option had to succeed right away, or not at all.*

Obama reaches out

Obama began his outreach to Iran only twelve minutes into his presidency, declaring in his inaugural address, "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." Two months later, on March 20, President Obama spoke directly to the Iranian government and people on the occasion of the Iranian New Year. Expressing his respect for the Iranian nation and civilization, while recognizing the Iranian government, Obama signaled a vision for a new,



new, constructive relationship between the two countries in a video address.

“I would like to speak clearly to Iran’s leaders,” Obama said. “We have serious differences that have grown over time. My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.”

Obama’s historic message was received with enthusiasm among the Iranian population. The reaction from the government was different, however. Within 24 hours, Khamenei gave a 40-minute speech in the city of Mashhad that criticized the Obama administration’s approach towards Iran while reciting a laundry list of Iranian grievances towards the US. But towards the end of the speech, an opening to the US was presented, but only after questioning America’s intentions and Obama’s control over the US’s foreign policy.

“We do not have any record of the new US president,” Khamenei told the worshippers in Mashhad. “We are observing, watching and judging. If you change, we will also change our behavior. If you do not change, we will be the same nation as 30 years ago.”

Suspicious in Iran in regards to America’s ultimate goal with the diplomatic outreach (was it nothing more than a more sophisticated approach to defeat the Islamic Republic) as well as Iran’s sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis the US (in spite of its bluster and aggressive rhetoric) prevented the Iranians from issuing a categorically positive response to Obama.

In addition, Iran had just entered its political season with the upcoming Presidential elections. The Obama administration was well aware that the political space it enjoyed in Washington for a diplomatic solution with Tehran would not last long. Pressures for a quick nuclear breakthrough or sanctions - particularly from Congress - was already visible by May 2009.

Time wasn’t on the administration’s side, but beginning the engagement prior to the elections carried the risk of accidentally benefitting Iran’s incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Ultimately, the decision was to continue to signal America’s interest in diplomacy on a variety of issues without pressing further until after the elections. The expectation was that by June 13, 2009, the day after the Iranian Presidential elections, clarity would exist in Iran about the future leadership and direction of the country.

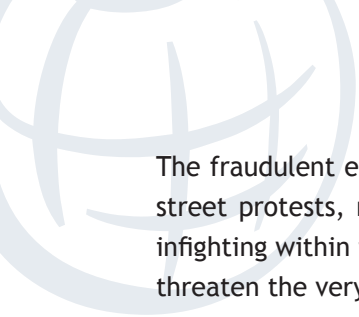
But once again, Iran proved its ability to bewilder America through its unpredictability.

Scandal

In spite of a massive last-week surge in support for Ahmadinejad’s primary opponent, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, a centrist who ran on a reformist ballot, Iranian TV announced only a few hours after the closing of the polls that the incumbent President had won a landslide victory of 62.5% of the votes.

Disbelief among Mousavi’s supporters quickly turned to anger. But the Ahmadinejad government had a plan. Immediately after State TV announced Ahmadinejad a winner, intelligence forces sacked the head quarters of Mousavi and other opposition figures and arrested their first and second circle of leaders and officials in order prevent any challenge to the election result.

But public anger against the stolen election was larger than what the Ahmadinejad government seemed to have expected. In spite of the arrests, Mousavi remained defiant and refused to accept the official election result. And three days after the elections, Iran saw the largest street protests in Tehran since the mass demonstrations that brought in the Islamic Republic 31 years earlier. An estimated 3 million Iranians took to the streets with a very simple demand - “Count my vote!” But the demands of the protesters were met with violence and increased repression.



The fraudulent elections were followed by months of street protests, massive human rights violations and infighting within the Iranian government that came to threaten the very existence of the regime.

What supporters of the Islamic Republic hoped would be a popular affirmation of the regime's legitimacy and popular support through massive participation in the elections, quickly turned out to become the most significant political crisis of the Iranian theocracy - a crisis that critics of the Iranian theocracy argue defeated both the regime's Islamic and its Republican features. What was left of a regime, which once could present a veneer of democratic features in an otherwise repressive system, was now nothing more than a regime that ruled from the barrel of a gun. Ultimately, at least in the short run, brute force enabled the Iranian government to restore its authority, but only at the expense of its legitimacy.

A political and moral dilemma

For Washington, the election crisis presented numerous challenges. On the one hand, images of mass demonstrations in Iran increased pressure at home for Obama to abandon engagement and to come to the active aid of the Iranian opposition in order to achieve regime change in Iran. On the other hand, momentum for sanctions in Congress grew considerably as a result of the election fraud with aim of short cutting diplomacy and replacing it with a policy of sanctions and confrontation. As a result, the already limited political space and time for diplomacy was further lessened, both due to a hardening of the political atmosphere in Washington and to the political paralysis that had overtaken Iran.

The Obama administration decided however to stay the course and keep the door open for diplomacy. Several factors contributed to this decision. First, the administration recognized that however desirable regime change in Iran might appear, the opposition in

Iran did not welcome American aid. Second, even if a decision was made to actively assist the opposition, America's ability to accurately calibrate the effects of its intervention in Iranian affairs left much to be desired. Obama recognized that a mere desire to help did not necessarily translate into an ability to help. Third, there was a lack of confidence that an opposition victory necessarily would lead to a different nuclear posture by Iran. Finally, the President's campaign promise to bring home US troops from Iraq and end the war in Afghanistan would be rendered significantly more difficult to fulfill unless some sort of a *modus vivendi* was found with Iran.

Still, the Iranian elections became a decisive blow to Obama's diplomatic outreach. Domestic pressure against diplomacy grew. "After the elections, skepticism in Congress against our strategy turned to outright hostility," a Senior Obama administration official told me. Moreover, many of those in the Obama administration that had been skeptical about engagement with Iran - including, presumably, Hillary Clinton - felt vindicated. The Obama administration's moral confidence in their strategy had suffered a severe blow.

By the time negotiations finally could begin on October 1, 2009, the Obama administration's policy had, in the words of a senior Obama administration official, become "a gamble on a single roll of the dice." There was no political space for patient talks. Diplomacy had to succeed right away - or not at all.

The rest is, as the saying goes, history. 

Trita Parsi is the president of the National Iranian American Council and author of *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (Yale University Press, 2011). To see a video and podcast of his presentation at the Centre for International Policy Studies, please visit our website: <http://cips.uottawa.ca>.



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