

## Diplomacy with Iran

"Few countries were as helpful to the United States in its early involvement in Afghanistan as Iran. Yet after the fall of the Taliban, the US failed to capitalize on the possibilities of that strategic relationship. Now coalition and Afghan troops are losing ground against the same insurgents they confronted in 2001, in a war that the United States is unlikely to win unless it rethinks its relationship with Iran."<sup>1</sup>

- Lawrence J. Korb, Former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, and Laura Conley, special assistant at the Center for American Progress.

In their final months, the Bush administration tacked tentatively towards diplomacy with Iran, though they ultimately failed to adopt the robust approach needed to repair the relationship. Congress and the new president must make Iran a top priority, and quickly set the right tone for getting US-Iran relations on the right track.

Concerns about Iran's nuclear program have often overshadowed the need for a new approach to the overall US-Iran relationship. For the United States, the goal of diplomacy should go beyond convincing the Iranians to forgo nuclear weapons, and should address our common security concerns. Iran is a dominant political player that has shown again and again its potential to be potently helpful as well as deeply undermining to US security interests in the region. Negotiations with Iran should emphasize their shared strategic interests with the United States, such as stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition, the United States needs a more effective strategy to work with Iran on nuclear nonproliferation issues. The Bush administration's approach was counterproductive. The findings of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran<sup>2</sup>, representing the consensus view of all 16 American intelligence agencies, reported that Iran's nuclear weapons program has been on hold since 2003 and that the decision to freeze the program was based on a cost-benefit approach that took into account political, economic and military costs. In spite of that, hawks in the Bush administration pushed behind the scenes to attack Iran militarily. The US pursued several rounds of UN sanctions against Iran and Congress considered unilateral sanctions legislation without seeing changes in Iran's behavior or any improvements in the relationship.<sup>3</sup> The Bush administration eliminated direct diplomacy as an option and insisted that Iran cease uranium enrichment as a precondition to opening negotiations. Iran has continued uranium enrichment as the US has continued its policy of isolation, and the pitched rhetoric has made public support for uranium enrichment inside Iran a matter of national pride.

The new president will need a sophisticated strategy based on a real understanding of Iran's national culture and political system. The Bush administration's saber-rattling approach made it easier, not harder, for hardliners inside Iran to ratchet up their anti-American rhetoric. Conversely, soon after the 2008 elections, some inside Iran expressed careful hope that the incoming president would embrace diplomacy in a way that would help moderates who have argued for normalized relations with the US for years.

It was those Iranian moderates who argued for and won Iranian support for the US effort in Afghanistan. Their voices were marginalized when, soon after Iran's assistance in Afghanistan, President Bush included Iran in his "Axis of Evil," and started insisting that Iran's uranium enrichment program was for clandestine nuclear weapons development.<sup>4</sup>

In a New York Times Opinion Editorial, Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, who worked in the National Security Council under the Bush administration, outline a possible framework for broad, productive negotiations with Iran. They propose that the US would need to clarify that it does not seek to overthrow the current regime, pledge to stop unilateral sanctions if Iran holds up its end of the bargain, normalize relations and remove Iran from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism. In exchange, Iran would need to address proliferation risks from its nuclear program, allow intrusive inspections, support a just and lasting settlement between Israel and Palestine, and stop providing military training and supplies to terrorist organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The arrival of a new administration in the US offers an opportunity for a new beginning with Iran. We can achieve a strategic, working relationship with Iran in the next few years, if we start now.

The new president and Congress should:

1. Pursue wide-ranging, direct negotiations without preconditions with Iran. Former US secretaries of state Colin Powell, Madeleine Albright, Warren Christopher, James Baker and Henry Kissinger all favor negotiating with Iran to address its nuclear program.<sup>6</sup>

The US can quickly set a constructive tone with Iran with early concrete steps, such as appointing a special envoy to Iran and opening an interests section. After roughly 30 years without diplomatic relations, the US needs to send a clear message that it is interested in productive engagement, and lay the groundwork for higher-level talks in the future. Talks should cover a wide range of issues, including US-Iranian cooperation in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, security assurances by the US, and the future of Iran's uranium enrichment program.

2. Refrain from hostile rhetoric and saber-rattling. The Bush administration's use of hostile rhetoric paired with incidents like the misunderstanding in the Strait of Hormuz between Iranian speedboats and US warships teetered dangerously towards a direct military confrontation, and strengthened President Ahmadinejad's political standing inside Iran. The new administration should make a clean break in tone and posture from the Bush approach.

3. Announce that the US does not seek regime change in Iran. With the threat of overt military action on the table, negotiations between the US and Iran are less likely to succeed from the beginning. In addition, the Iranian government views the US-funded "democracy promotion" program in Iran as an American attempt to incite a "velvet revolution."<sup>7</sup> Pro-democracy reformists and human rights activists note that the Iranian people are best positioned to create change, and threats of regime change by the US hurt their cause as reformists are made the targets of government crackdowns.<sup>8</sup> The US can make it clear that it seeks a change in the behavior of Iran, rather than a change in leadership.

#### Footnotes

1. "The Contributions of Iran," The Boston Globe, October 24, 2008

2. "U.S. Says Iran Ended Atomic Arms Work", New York Times, Dec 3, 2007

3. Joint Experts' Statement on Iran, November 2008

4. "Iran, N. Korea still part of 'axis of evil'-W.House", Reuters, July 21, 2008

5. "How to Defuse Iran," New York Times, Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, December 11, 2007

6. "Five former U.S. state secretaries urge Iran talks," Reuters, September 16, 2008

7. "An Exercise in Futility: State Department 'Democracy Promotion' Funding for Iran," The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, April 22, 2008.

8. "Shirin Ebadi: Don't Attack Iran," The Nation, April 29, 2008.