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Weekend Edition
March 12-14, 2010

# An Open Letter to President Obama

# U. S. Foreign Policy and Post-Election Iran

By CYRUS BINA

Mr. President,

This note is intended to persuade you to go back to the drawing board on the question of Iran. The internal ideological confrontation in the Islamic Republic of Iran is irretrievably in the open. The cumulative effects of thirty years of political repression and internal dissent, both inside and outside the ruling circle, at least since the 1999 student uprising, have already come home to roost at the doorsteps of the regime in the aftermath of summer (2009) election in Iran. Neither the difference between the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei government and the all-embracing spectrum of masses across the country nor the cleavage within the regime itself is deemed reconcilable at this point. And, although the leadership of the latter is cowed to some reconciling statements lately, the fact remains that post-election Iran and the preemptive coup d’état that followed are inseparable; this must mean a regime change (i.e., a metamorphosis) within the regime itself. The paramilitary government of Ahmadinejad-Khamenei, while attempting at cannibalization of its own fellow travelers, is gearing up to impose its “rationalized” version of the Islamic Republic upon the varied, vibrant, and vigorous opposition at large.

“Down with the Dictator,” which was the motto of daring youth and intellectuals in 1999, has now become a universal expression in streets of Tehran and other major cities by the massive cross-section of the population—composed of all ages, gender, education, and all social classes in the mix. Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s former president—who had allowed the “Revolutionary Guard” and the paramilitary Basij do their dirty work, in provocation, incarceration, and even torturing of protesting students then—is now among the prominent leaders of (intra-regime) opposition. This premeditated (mid-summer) coup d'état against the many founding fathers of the Islamic Republic is indeed a telling story about the para-militarization of economy and polity, and eventual inauguration of a fully-fledged paramilitary state in post-election Iran.

The metamorphosis of the regime can be revealed through many critical changes that catapulted Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—a former guardsman—to the presidency of Iran in 2005. He is the quintessential face of a sub-class of unproductive military and paramilitary rentier whose hands are extended into many cookie jars, from industrial military enterprises, oil contracts and production facilities, pipelines and civil engineering constructions, to telecommunication and security, official and off-the-shelf interrogation facilities, administration of justice and judiciary, university administration, state radio and television, and the Majles—the law-making branch of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Today, the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij, including an army of plain-clothed thugs, are now the de facto source of power in Iran; these are the seven-course meal in the day-to-day governance of the country, and the clergy (other than Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his tiny clique) is like the proverbial dessert to top it off. And it is a cruel irony that, in the first place, mere prevention of an external coup (like the one by the CIA in 1953) had prompted the creation of the Revolutionary Guard, yet the latter has come to inflict a fatal blow so immense to this regime that no foreign power could have ever done it, so precisely and with such a bizarre twist.

The Role of Sanctions

There is no question that sanctions have wreaked havoc on the Iranian economy, from top to bottom, and created discomfort for the regime. There’s also no doubt that these sanctions have created disproportional hardships for the bulk of the population, particularly the poorest of the poor in Iran. Yet, at the same time, any permanent and unremitting regime of sanctions, no matter how targeted, tends to create some sort of adaptability (and immunity) if it is maintained for a long time. Here I sense a speck of historical helplessness in all this, which is grudgingly promoting the necessity of tactics against the sufficiency of strategy, long before your Administration. It is expected that the foreign policy of a civilized nation should allow no room for the priority of tactics over strategy. Yet it occurs to me that we have never had a suitable foreign-policy strategy on Iran since the fall of the Shah, in 1979, which was simultaneous with the end of an era—the fall of the Pax Americana. You may have read Sun Tzu’s The Art of War—please read it again. This classic volume is not about war, per se—it’s about strategy. The longstanding U.S. sanctions against Cuba, for instance, have neither been effective nor contributed to larger and worthwhile strategic objectives—these silly sanctions simply made us look like a bully in the neighborhood. In other words, imposing sanction is always tactical and thus one needs to watch out for their unintended consequences upon one’s strategy.

However, in Iran’s case something more profound had happened in conjunction with the longstanding U.S. sanctions since the 1980s. These sanctions continued until the mid-1990s, only to be renewed and beefed up by the Clinton and the Bush-Cheney administrations, before being considered to be “toughened up” again by your administration today. On the surface, it looks as if the United States is running out of options—and that’s how the United States usually is setting itself up for a fall. However, something more profound and sinister has been in the works all the while Iran was on the road to recovery from the eight-year war of attrition with Iraq through Rafsanjani’s eight-year reconstruction and Khatami’s eight-year purported reform.

For those in your foreign policy team who have read John Maynard Keynes’s The Economic Consequences of the Peace and who are kind enough to substitute the word “sanction” for “reparation” and “Iran” for “Germany,” it should be a little surprise to glimpse the remarkable parallels. In the aftermath of the armistice agreement at the Versailles (1919), Lord Keynes with incredible insight wrote:

The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable—abhorrent and detestable, even if it were possible, even if it enriched ourselves, even if it did not sow the decay of the whole civilized life of Europe. Some preach it in the name of Justice. In the great events of man’s history, in the unwinding of the complex fates of nations Justice is not so simple. And if it were, nations are not authorized, by religion or by natural morals, to visit on the children of their enemies the misdoings of parents or of rulers (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1920: 225).

In a nutshell, this passage is remarkably parallel with what the U.S. foreign policy has managed to accomplish against the people of Iran—advertently or inadvertently. And it is precisely how the para-militarization of the bruised, battered, and war-torn Iran got under way where an organized force, namely, the Revolutionary Guard, set out to exploit the beleaguering U.S. sanctions and rather successfully snatched all opportunities from its dispersed, disadvantaged, and disorganized private rivals across the commercial and industrial landscape, with the blessings of the bulky and besieged state in Iran. In other words, the asymmetric impact of U.S. sanctions—combined with political calculations by the state in searching for a way out—led to a state of emergency, absence of competitive environment, and urgency for outright control and cronyism through total reliance on the Guard. The Guard, while it was encroaching on the economic domain, was also gaining a foothold in the political arena. This was about the time that horrible incidents linked to multiple political assassinations of the opposition, and of independent writers and intellectuals, by off-the-shelf dead-squads within the Information Ministry, combined with the subsequent (1999) student unrest, made a mockery of the Khatami administration.

The Revolutionary Guard’s threat of the coup d'état (1999) and Khatami’s ineptitude and submissiveness should be considered as the turning point in political domination of the Guard. Hence, it could be said that, while the Iran-Iraq War had created the necessary conditions for this para-militarization to emerge, U.S. sanctions provided the very sufficient condition for this monster to take hold within the Iranian state. As a result, Ahmadinejad’s recent paramilitary coup constitutes in some measure a corollary of the longstanding US sanctions against Iran. And, unsurprisingly, resurrection and rejuvenation of this Frankenstein is, quintessentially, a joint-product of three decades of U.S.-Iran relations, including the United States’ objectionable and obtuse policy of taking sides with Saddam Hussein during the course of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Now, allow me to be a bit explicit: the right and the responsibility to change their regime absolutely belong to Iranians themselves. The United States has done enough, so far, to mess up the peoples’ lives and mess with the course of change in this country. So, let the United States—for heaven’s sake—refrain from inhibiting this vibrant democratic resistance and flowering movement with our habitual Iran policy, which is shamefully no more than an appendage to our customary Israel policy.

The likely U.S. Iran Policy

The question of what to do with Iran has to be treated on his own right, without being made an appendage to U.S. policy vis-à-vis other nations in the Middle East. Neither putting words in Saudi Arabia’s mouth nor rehearsing tactically (and opportunistically) with other Arab nations on Iran will ever prove advantageous in the long run. Indeed, like our Iran policy, our foreign policy toward the Arabs is similarly an appendage of our Israel policy. And the recent statement made by your Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, that the United States wants a nuclear-free Middle East, is not only a panoramic subterfuge but an insult on the old injury for the Arabs, the Turks, and the Iranians alike. Who does she think she’s kidding? Mark my words—Mr. President. When the time comes for the Arabs to be rewarded on this feeble quid pro quo dubbed our Middle East policy, say, on the Palestinian issue, we know darn well that we will have to kick sand in their face. Just recount the number of UN resolutions and our positions on this very single issue alone—Mr. President. That is why it is imperative for the United States to fully overhaul its Middle East policy before addressing the question of Palestine.

Foreign policy is neither a charity nor an interest-group proposition. It’s a long-term plan of action and/or inaction. Foreign policy is not about the projection of power but power without projection. And the United States, particularly in the last decade, has done exactly the opposite of that. To boast that “all options are on the table” is obtuse for three simple reasons: (1) that it is the crudest form of bullying since the era of Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun, (2) that it sends a message that unless you are a nuclear power we’re going to mess with you, and (3) that it creates unnecessary suspicion and thus preempts the next opportunity. So, anyone who utters these words should be thrown out of any serious foreign-policy discussion, let alone foreign-policy decision.

War is a toxic asset with incalculable probability. Considering war as an option by self-proclaimed foreign policy experts resembles the action by Wall Street portfolio managers who had hastily sliced and thrown into the mix the “toxic assets” and wrecked our financial system many times over. War, as we are experiencing it up to our elbows today, is an option of sophomoric, single-minded, symmetry-seeking fools in three-piece suits. All-options-are-open is the option of a delusional power that lost its sense of reality and acts in the wrong century. The balance of power has irreversibly shifted since the 1980s when the world entered the epoch of the post-hegemonic/post-Pax Americana (i.e., a good decade prior to the fall of the Soviets), and Iran and the Middle East are only a persistent constituent part of it. In other words, the balance of power is way beyond the potential nuclear Iran and Israel’s tantrum. Thus, maintaining the same good old posturing would set off, rather deceivingly, such a vulgar statement, by the Israeli Defense Minister, that “Sanctions on Iran should be for a very short time and then ….” This pronouncement has been made on the expectation the United States go to war with Iran. And when Washington is wondering how, manufacturing of the “existential threat” and merchandizing of the war take the center stage in the media frenzy. The United States has recently made so many of these feel-good decisions based on fictitious ambitions and outright colonial conduct. The two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are undeniably within these categories.

What to do with Iran is often reduced to what to do with enriching uranium in Iran. And any realistic expert in this field should know that (1) enrichment of uranium is the right of all nations, particularly the ones that signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NNT), (2) periodic inspections are necessary and available at the IAEA, (3) there’s no limit for any nation to gain the knowledge of nuclear technology (including the knowledge of making bomb), (4) The NNT is not only about nonproliferation of nuclear weapons but also their absolute reduction, (5) India, Pakistan, and Israel are all have nuclear bombs with more than enough warheads to below up the entire region many times over, and (6) none of these countries are even persuaded by the United States to sign the NNT. Parenthetically, in just a few weeks, the world should be watching what will have to come out of the so-called U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, particularly on the question that America’s nuclear arsenal is the “sole purpose” against nuclear attack or is it the “primary purpose,” providing the probable first-use and thus escalating an arms race that would potentially make the Cold-War era look like a school-yard altercation.

Notwithstanding the above points, the entire question boils down to the perceived threat by Israel in respect to the potential knowledge of bomb-making by Iran, and passing it to real or imagined terrorists—which is a deliberate mix-up of the fact and fantasy in order to camouflage the real issue. This tantrum alone constitutes the hallmark of de facto U.S. foreign policy on Iran, which should make every serious (and informed) citizen of this country blush with amazement. Given the opinion of most respected experts, Ahmadinejad’s claim of approaching 20 percent enrichment capability, from 3.5 percent earlier, is a technical impossibility. Ahmadinejad is a Sarah Palin without lipstick. He is known for his rabble-rousing, empty rhetoric, and idiotic boasting (he is nicknamed khali band, a flaky fellow who carries a gun with no bullets), and getting worse by the hour, given his weak and uncertain position at home. Time is not on Ahmadinejad’s (or Khamenei’s) side. The United States should not fall for either this or the Israel Lobby (AIPAC) in Washington—which is historically a feeder of blood to umbilical cord of our feudal foreign policy. There is no urgency to negotiate with Iran on this issue by any stretch of imagination, other than the urging of neoconservative warmongers inside and outside your Administration. Instead, we should append any such perceived threats to a brand new, stand-alone, thoughtful, and thorough foreign policy on Iran, with or without the Islamic Republic. The continuation of the habitual, and indeed feudal, U.S. policy toward Israel and consequently treating the region (including Iran) as appendage will not get you anywhere. The United States is stuck between killing hope (i.e., sanctions and more sanctions) and a toxic future (i.e., yet another war) by design and help of poisonous interest-group politics in Washington. This is the toolbox of the devil that seeks the freefall of the United States and that has long been placed at the center-stage of foreign policy in this and other cases.

Therefore, I urge you to delay any serious talks with Iran as long as Ahmadinejad is holding power. This has a double benefit: (1) it would create a space to for us to revisit the fault-lines between the two countries, and to set our Iran policy on a carefully considered comprehensive course that departs from this ad hoc, embarrassing, and double-standard posture, and (2) it would lend moral support to the manifold and flowering movement in Iran. This is in contrast with failure of sanctions and of attacking Iran (directly or by proxy), and literally turning the clock back for another 20 or 30 years on this magnificent, self-activating democratic movement that, despite all human costs, is now the envy of the world.

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