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How to Talk to Iran

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IF there are any two words in Persian that President Obama should learn, they are “maslahat” and “aberu.” Maslahat is often translated as expediency, or self-interest. Aberu means face — as in, saving face. In the nearly 34 years since the Islamic revolution in Iran, expediency has been a pillar of decision making, but within a framework that has allowed Iranian leaders to save face. If there is to be any resolution of the nuclear standoff, Western leaders must grasp these concepts.

Two examples illustrate this point. In 1988, after eight years of devastating war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Iran’s first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, accepted a United Nations-brokered cease-fire agreement, deeming it to be in Iran’s maslahat. It was crucial that Iraqi forces had been pushed off Iranian soil, so Tehran could claim a victory.

Thirteen years later, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had sheltered Al Qaeda, in a matter of weeks. American troops would never have made it to Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif with such speed had Iran’s leaders not acquiesced to the toppling of their enemies to the east. But the George W. Bush administration squandered an opportunity for dialogue by spurning this potential diplomatic overture by Iran.

For thousands of years, Persian culture has been distinguished by customs that revolve around honor and esteem. Preserving one’s aberu is tantamount to maintaining one’s dignity. There are almost no instances in modern Iranian history when maslahat has trumped aberu. The West has poorly understood these concepts. This was particularly true under President Bush, who rewarded Iran’s tacit acceptance of the American invasion of Afghanistan by labeling Iran a member of an “axis of evil.”

Following the 2003 allied invasion of Iraq, the Swiss ambassador to Iran [reached out](#) to Washington with an unofficial outline for a “grand bargain” with Tehran that would cover everything from Iran’s nuclear program to its support for militant groups in the region. Despite this bold step, Iran was left out in the cold. Vice President Dick Cheney [dismissed the initiative](#), reportedly asserting that “we don’t talk to evil.”

We now know, thanks to a recent memoir by the former Iranian nuclear negotia

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Rowhani, that the Bush administration reached out to Tehran a year after dismissing the proposal. Not surprisingly, partly because of the blow to its pride, the Iranian government rejected the offer of direct, high-level talks as insincere. In the nine years since, Iran's nuclear program — a major symbol of prestige for Iranians — has grown immensely. Things have gotten a lot more complicated.

The pattern of missed opportunities has persisted for more than three decades now. The result is that Barack Obama is the sixth consecutive president who has been led to view Iran as a threat rather than an opportunity. It is time for America to exit this vicious cycle and disregard irrational voices intent on sabotaging efforts to reach an understanding.

When Mr. Obama took office in 2009, he promised a real dialogue with Iran. Many in Tehran are still waiting for him to deliver on that promise. But how?

The foundation of post-1979 decision making in Iran is the pursuit of sovereignty within a framework that balances *maslahat* and *aberu*. We believe Iran would be open to new measures regarding the transparency of its nuclear program, and would agree not to pursue any capability to enrich uranium beyond that needed to fuel atomic power plants, if its legitimate right to enrichment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty was recognized and if an agreement to remove sanctions was reached.

Equally important is how a deal would be implemented. Decades of mutual, institutionalized hostility have created a gulf of mistrust that neither side can unilaterally bridge. So getting the sequence right would be crucial to any accord.

While Tehran views a deal on its nuclear program as being in its self-interest, Western leaders need to grasp that it would be devastating for Iran's *aberu* to take the first step solely in exchange for promises. The dominant discourse in Tehran portrays the 2004 decision by the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami to suspend uranium enrichment on a voluntary, temporary basis as a failure because it resulted only in humiliating calls by the West for an indefinite suspension. The moral of this narrative is that placing *maslahat* above *aberu*, even temporarily, leads to nothing good.

In the coming months, Iran is expected to again engage with the so-called P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France, along with Germany). Mr. Obama and his team, including his chief Iran negotiator, Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, should reflect on the meaning of *maslahat* and *aberu*. Understanding the Iranian mentality is key to grasping why the Iranians won't put expediency above dignity. The only way to stop the dispute over Iran's nuclear program from spinning out of control is to offer the Islamic Republic a face-saving way out.

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