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Rules for Successful Engagement with Iran

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In his first year in office, President Barack Obama made unprecedented diplomatic gestures towards Iran, raising hopes that the animosities that have plagued US-Iran relations for the past three decades might be overcome and rapprochement achieved. In a special message on March 21, 2009, commemorating the Persian New Year, Obama promised a new approach that would diverge from the previous administration's bellicose attitude, one which would "not be advanced by threats." In a speech delivered in Cairo three



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months later, Obama went one step further, pledging that, "we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect." Such a call for engagement without preconditions and without threats was a first for any American President since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Even before Obama's overtures, Iranian President Ahmadinejad took the first tentative steps toward dialogue, writing letters to President George W. Bush and to Obama, including congratulating the latter on his electoral victory in 2008; however his US counterparts never responded to him. Ahmadinejad has for various reasons had a freer hand than previous Iranian presidents in engaging in direct negotiations with the US.

Hence, Obama's initial gestures met with positive signs from Tehran. Obama sent two letters to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who responded once. Though sticking points in bilateral relations were on full display in this exchange, both sides indicated a willingness, at least, to talk. By the very low bar set by previous US-Iran diplomacy, this was a considerable accomplishment. In October 2009, the highest-level talks ever held between America and the Islamic Republic took place

between US Under Secretary of State William Burns and Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili. In parallel to these high-level talks, two Administrations have quietly encouraged "track 1 ½ dialogue" in which high-level former US officials meet with current Iranian officials.

Despite this unprecedented willingness of both Tehran and Washington to talk, engagement has failed thus far, and will continue to fail as long as both sides undermine it with "dual track approaches." Official statements and now diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks show that since early on in Obama's tenure, even as the Administration spoke of rapprochement, the US continued the Bush Administration's policy of ratcheting up pressure on Iran through new sanctions, hinting at a readiness to take military action, and supporting covert sabotage of Iran's nuclear program.

This approach has been counterproductive. It has left Iran with the impression that the US has no real interest in thawing relations, and that Obama's talk of engagement with Iran is just talk. Hostile actions speak louder than friendly words. Ayatollah Khamenei, noted, "They say they extended their arm towards Iran. What kind of hand? If it is an iron hand covered with a velvet glove, then it will not make any good sense."

In practice, it seemed, little has changed from the Bush era, except that the new administration has proved more adept at pushing through international sanctions against Iran. This perception is prevalent outside of Iran as well: after this past November's elections, the director of the Tel Aviv-based Middle East Economic and Political Analysts Company called on incoming Republican members of Congress to support President Obama's Iran policy because "Obama has done more to undermine Iran over the course of two years than George W. Bush did in eight."

Just as they have raised suspicions, threats and sanctions have limited the room for Iranian officials to maneuver. If they compromise, their political opponents accuse them of surrendering to foreign bullying.

Iran meanwhile has pursued a dual track of its own. Ahmadinejad has sabotaged his engagement policy with inflammatory rhetoric that has antagonized the US and its allies, questioning the Holocaust, suggesting that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a US government conspiracy, and saying that Israel must be erased from the pages of history. In reality, these were all efforts to shore up Ahmadinejad's political base and give him the latitude to pursue rapprochement in practice without losing the support of Iran's right wing, the so-called "Principlists."

Mirroring the self-defeating threats and sanctions of the US, Ahmadinejad's rhetoric has increased tremendously the political cost to American politicians of being seen as soft on Iran. At the same time the US has taken the toughest policies to date: the most far-reaching sanction legislation in the history of Iran-US relations with the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) of 2010, sanctions on individual Iranian officials, and securing UN Security Council resolution 1929 as the most comprehensive sanctions the international community has ever approved against Iran. The US Navy even went so far as to order all units under its command to re-label the Persian Gulf as "The Arabian Gulf," in what seems a measure of pure vindictiveness. These actions have in turn raised the cost to the Iranian side of approaching the US for rapprochement.

There are many major areas where the US and Iran have joint interests: stabilizing Afghanistan and dealing with the Taliban, neutralizing Al Qaeda, stemming international drug trafficking, and developing Iran's energy sector, to name a few. Yet there have been few official bilateral channels through which collaboration in these fields can be pursued. Virtually the only places where Iranian and American diplomats can officially talk are the multilateral nuclear negotiations that include Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany.

The US has, in a way, put all the eggs of engagement in the basket of the nuclear issue, requiring Iran to accept the demands of America and its allies as a prerequisite to broader relations. Iran, with wariness bred by a host of past false starts in its relations with the US, wants to see the entire roadmap to rapprochement in advance out of fear that it will show goodwill and get little in return. Clearly, if neither side budes, the crisis in relations will only get worse.

This difference over what to discuss first could be overcome through direct low-level negotiations conducted without publicity to prepare the groundwork for comprehensive talks at the highest level—as long as the commitment to engagement is genuine.

The heart of the matter is that both sides are confused about whether engagement is, for the other side, a strategy or a tactic. Calls from Iran for comprehensive negotiations are dismissed in Washington as stalling tactics to buy time for its nuclear program to move forward. Talk from the America about unclenching fists and opportunities to restore confidence are dismissed in Tehran as a way to preempt criticism that the US didn't exhaust diplomatic options before going to war.

Dual track approaches are—from the standpoint of domestic political survival—the easy way to go for leaders in both countries, but they are not the way out. Rapprochement between Washington and Tehran will be possible only when, for the duration of engagement policy:

- The language of threats and angry rhetoric is set aside,
- Hostile actions, sanctions, and other forms of coercive pressure are put on hold,
- A comprehensive agenda, including all bilateral, regional and international issues, is discussed through direct talks,
- Issues of common interest are given priority in the talks, and
- Domestic political factions in both countries are convinced to cooperate, at least temporarily, while negotiations are conducted.

The final point is of special significance in light of recent Republican electoral gains, which seems to promise a Congress even more hawkish than were the solid Democratic majorities in both houses.

Hardliners in both countries, citing the lack of progress over those two-three years, have already dismissed engagement as tried and failed. Engagement might well fail. But without a genuine test during which hostilities are put on hold, there is no way to make this judgment.

Clearly, this will be risky for leaders on both sides, but taking a risk is better than ensuring failure through a continuation of the same policies, and thus the same escalation of the confrontation. A measure of bravery and wisdom in Washington and Tehran may go a long way.

Ambassador Hossein Mousavian, now at Princeton University, is a former Iranian ambassador to Germany and senior nuclear negotiator under the Khatami administration. Photo credit: [HenryJacksonSociety](http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org) [2].

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