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Why Ayatollah Khamenei is Pessimistic about Relations with the United States

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Part (1): Four major, interrelated elements shape Ayatollah Khamenei’s perception of the US

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First, he wholeheartedly believes that regardless of all the ups and downs, pushes and pulls between Iran and the US, Washington’s ultimate intention is to topple Iran’s Islamic system and subordinate them within a Pax Americana, as it did during the Shah’s era after the 1953 coup. Ayatollah Khamenei maintains that the US, no matter which school of thought and party is in power or which president has taken office, intends to “wipe out the Islamic Republic” with all possible means at its disposal. The conclusion he draws from US rhetoric, policies, and behavior is that the US will not relent from its desire for regime change unless the current government surrenders its principles, religious beliefs, political structure, and independence. The United States’ tacit support for Saddam Hussein’s invasion and provision of material support, its covert operations, support for belligerent groups and the Islamic Republic’s opposition (including a budgetary provision), its denial of Iran’s right to peaceful enrichment under the NPT, and its intrusive and paralyzing economic sanctions are all viewed by Ayatollah Khamenei as indisputable attempts to bring about an end to the Islamic Republic. He maintains that the US’s primary objective is to undermine the Islamic government by fostering internal disorder and, ultimately, regime change.

The **second** element that shapes Ayatollah Khamenei’s disposition towards the US is his firm belief that US foreign policy in the Middle East, and specifically regarding Iran, is overwhelmingly dominated by the pro-Israel lobby. From his point of view, even the president of the United States does not have any authority over US foreign policy. He is surprised that year after year, the president or other high-level officials of the most powerful country on earth attend American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) gatherings and report what they have done to undermine the Iranian government and satisfy pro-Israel lobby demands. Although there is in general a consensus within the nezam about Israel’s influence on US Middle East policy, some argue that it is the Zionists who determine the US foreign policy, and not Americans.

The **third** element shaping the Supreme Leader’s perception of the US is his extreme mistrust of American politics. The documents confiscated by students after seizing the US Embassy seemed to justify such a stance by many high-echelon Iranian politicians, including Ayatollah Khamenei. According to those documents, the embassy was involved in espionage and the fostering of covert links to members of the new government and army.

Finally, Ayatollah Khamenei’s sees the American government and the system it represents as addicted to arrogance and hegemony. He feels that if a country is not seen as a “great power,” then a lord–serf relationship is the only kind of relationship that the US is prepared to accept.

Many believe that the Iranian system is solely driven by a religious impetus. That assessment is incorrect. Underneath the superficial layers of religious beliefs, Iranians are deeply nationalistic. They see themselves as a great country, accredited with being the cradle of civilization; rich with culture and history dating back thousands of



years; positively contributing to the world in many fields including science, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, art, and music.

All of these attributes lend themselves to the heightened nationalism esteemed by Iranians. So, when Congress or the US administration attempt to bully using threats and intimidation, or try to humiliate the Iranian government by endless repetition of the “all options on the table” mantra and other rhetoric, Iran’s strong sense of national pride is offended. Such behavior on the part of the Americans also strengthens Ayatollah Khamenei’s view that the US is not looking for an equal and balanced relationship. Rather, it seeks, as he describes it, a lord–serf relationship.

However, despite Ayatollah Khamenei’s pessimistic view of the American political system, Rafsanjani and Khatami clearly espoused reconciliation with the US. Rafsanjani fought hard to attain this objective and “emphasized that the resumption of relations with Washington ‘would not be in contradiction with Iran’s objectives’ if American policies were ‘truly corrected.’”

Rafsanjani did his best to bring the Lebanese hostage crisis to an end with the hopes that President George Bush would honor his commitment that “goodwill begets goodwill.” He failed to do so. Under Khatami’s watch, Iran helped the US in Afghanistan, hoping for reciprocation, and offered a grand bargain that was rejected by the administration of President George W. Bush. Ayatollah Khamenei, although reluctant and pessimistic, did not block those efforts at rapprochement. In fact, he continues to emphasize that he has never said that relations with the US will remain severed forever.

But in practical terms, Ayatollah Khamenei argues that the US goal of having bilateral talks with Iran is not motivated by a desire to resolve problems and disputes between the two countries. He feels that the US would approach such talks prepared to twist arms, threaten, intimidate, and ultimately withdraw, if they felt that Iran was not prepared to concede the upper hand to America.

He is also concerned that America’s powerful media would make the situation even worse, humiliating the revolution and Iranians, thus damaging Iran’s stature as the leading anti-imperialist country in the Muslim world beyond repair. He therefore posits that if Iran cannot be 100 percent certain that the US position has changed, it must not risk humiliation in “bilateral” talks, the outcome of which might have been determined in advance.

Ayatollah Khamenei is also conscious of the fact that some security analysts have suggested that any restoration of relations with the US might simply provide an opportunity for American intelligence to infiltrate Iran—a thesis made more credible by the previous history of the 1953 coup and the documents seized from the American Embassy, apart from the Ayatollah’s prevailing mindset. “The US waged war against Iraq while Washington had diplomatic ties with Baghdad, secondly diplomatic ties with the US would pave the way for the infiltration of US spies into the country, so diplomatic relations with Washington would not be useful to the Iranian nation,” said the Supreme Leader.

One of the less obvious hurdles to the normalization of relations between Iran and the US, in my opinion, may be the issue of “cultural aggression” or *tahajome farhangi*, as Ayatollah Khamenei puts it.

A large faction of Principalists, including grassroots supporters of the institution of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which is symbolized and represented by the Supreme Leader, resist moral, social, and liberal political values. This is because their religious principles are fiercely in conflict with the Western culture that permits sexual freedom, consumption of alcohol, women wearing revealing clothes, and the separation of church (religion) and state.

In addition, Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the US deliberately promotes liberal values among the Iranian young, both to erode their religious beliefs and ultimately to undermine the influence of Iran’s Islamic system.

The Iranian ruling elite, including the Supreme Leader, has no doubt that numerous Farsi television stations, primarily in the United States, are directly or indirectly sponsored by the US government as a major channel of cultural aggression towards Iranian society. This notion was reinforced by the allocation of \$75 million in the US’s 2007 budget to expand radio and television broadcasts in Iran, an action that stirred anger among Iran’s

conservatives.

Some argue that hostile reactions to US cultural intrusion by the ruling elite in Iran are part of a “cold war” strategy, primarily relating to power rather than religious motives. The reality is that apart from the leader of Iran’s revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, and a limited circle of his followers, the vast majority of the clergy had been apolitical until the mid-1970s, neither opposing nor supporting the Shah openly. However, the majority of the clergy eventually joined the revolutionary movement since the Shah’s regime continued to promote Westernization and failed to deal with what they perceived to be moral decadence in the country.

Ayatollah Khamenei views deliberate cultural invasion to be part of the US project of regime change.