

Change but no Change: U.S. - Iran Relations through the Lens of President Obama's Nowruz Messages (2009-2012)

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Abstract

Political relations between the United States and post-Revolutionary Iran have been almost constantly in turmoil. Obama's rise to power in the U.S. brought some hope for 'change' and a new drive for good in America's relationship with Iran. This paper studies the four Persian New Year (Nowruz) messages of March 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, sent by U.S. President Barack Obama to the Iranian people. According to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the rhetoric of Obama has been different in his messages; namely, it has turned from a soft and friendly tone in the first Nowruz message to a more hostile one in his second and third messages. Writers argue that these shifts are due to the long-standing condition of mistrust and fluctuations in the U.S.-Iran relationship on the one hand, and domestic politics during these four years on the other. The fourth message (2012) is mixed with disapproval and blessings, very much due to the U.S. internal politics, as President Obama needs a calm Iran to win the 2012 election. These unprecedented rhetoric measures seemed as great changes toward rapprochement of the broken ties between Iran and the United States. However, the complex U.S. foreign policy decision-making process has paralyzed the President, preventing him from entering a totally different path versus Iran. Furthermore, domestic politics in the U.S. and Iran during the past years show that neither country were ready to set the tone of their politics in tune with a better relationship.

Keywords: Obama, Nowruz message, rhetoric, change, US, foreign policy, Iran

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Introduction

Hoping to see the victory of presidential hopeful, Barack Hussein Obama, a Democratic candidate with dark complexion and bright ideas, many people both in the U.S. and Iran followed the 2008 U.S. presidential election carefully. His tool in exposing his ideas was his ability to use language. He was able to put those new thoughts and theories into impressive sentences. Using body language, facial expression, intonation, repetition, sharing his experiences with his audiences and some other of his mannerism have made his rhetoric unique to him and created a charisma for him.

This ability has also been reflected in his foreign policy in general and in his approach towards Iran in particular. So when he announced in his first Nowruz message that he particularly “would like to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, it really meant something. Those who hoped to see the defrosting of the icebergs between the two countries took it as a positive sign to fill the huge gap in between. They were reassured when he mentioned the Iranians’ “great civilization” and “accomplishments” and talked about “the common humanity that binds us together”.

These statements, at first, may bring hope to the hearts of those who wished to renew the broken ties between Iran and America. However, the sense of despair in the relation was there as well, i.e. when Obama announced his policy toward Iran in his debate with rival Republican candidate John McCain.

So our policy over the last eight years has not worked. We



cannot tolerate a nuclear Iran. Not only would it threaten Israel, a country that is our stalwart ally, but it would also set off an arms race in the Middle East. We are going to have to engage in tough direct diplomacy with Iran and this is a major difference I have with Senator McCain, this notion by not talking to people we are punishing them has not worked. It has not worked in Iran; it has not worked in North Korea. In each instance, our efforts of isolation have actually accelerated their efforts to get nuclear weapons (first presidential debate, 2008).

Therefore, the policy of being tough was accompanied by talking to people whom he wished to convince. There are times when he has expressed his views about the Iranian government and people; however, the most significant messages of his in this regard are four annual messages for the Persian New Years of 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 which this paper is going to analyze and compare. During this period, Obama's policy toward Iran has witnessed shifts. This paper argues that the shifts in tone in Obama's Nowruz messages are reflections of two elements: partially US internal politics; and to some extent realities in the Iran-US relationship founded in policies in Washington and Tehran. Furthermore, the paper - while articulating the deteriorating relations during the first to the third Nowruz messages period (2009-2011) - argues that the fourth message, which has a milder tone, is softer due to internal U.S. politics, and not in any enhancement in bilateral relations with Iran.

I- Obama's Nowruz Messages

Obama has delivered four Persian New Year messages to Iranians, starting from 20th March 2009, the first year of his term. Although a significant number of Iranians live in the United States, Nowruz messages have turned into a public diplomacy tool to convince Iranians living in Iran about the justification for U.S. policies towards Iran. Analyzing, interpreting, and comparing these messages in the context of the existing environment in Iran-U.S. relations on the one



hand, and the domestic politics of Iran and the United States in the years of the messages on the other, provides an accurate picture of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

March 2009: Obama's first message on the occasion of the Persian New Year in March 2009 included some positive and optimistic elements. As a matter of fact, Obama's initiative in addressing Iran's leaders in his message was unprecedented and could be implied as a step forward, when he announced that "In particular, I would like to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran (White House. Gov, 2010)." Or his desire for talks with Iranian leaders as he mentions: "So in this season of new beginnings I would like to speak clearly to Iran's leaders." Putting together these unprecedented points, the audience would find it is obvious that the dominant tone was hopeful and promising. Analyzing the main themes found in this message identifies two main ideas: "depicting the common issues between the two countries", and "depicting U.S. eagerness and attempts to renew and reconstruct the broken ties between the two countries". These themes can be considered as the spirit of this message. Although there are some pessimistic signs in this message as well, this paper deals with the dominant tone.

In his 2009 Nowruz message, Obama at first used the heritage of the Iranian people to pave the way to show his good intentions and somehow melt the ice. "Nowruz is just one part of your great and celebrated culture. Over many centuries your art, your music, literature and innovation have made the world a better and more beautiful place." Recounting Iran's accomplishments may show that the other side has taken a new position. This language was never been used about post-revolution Iran by Obama's predecessors. The mentioning of the enhancement of the American community through interaction with Iranians and appreciation of this civilization is unique to him too. "Here in the United States our own communities have been enhanced by the contributions of Iranian Americans. We know



that you are a great civilization, and your accomplishments have earned the respect of the United States and the world.”

In his first message, Obama used one of his rhetoric characteristics to create a sense of togetherness: “With the coming of a new season, we're reminded of this precious humanity that we all share.”

He tries to draw these communions even from the surface of the traditions: “But at this holiday we are reminded of the common humanity that binds us together. Indeed, you will be celebrating your New Year in much the same way that we Americans mark our holidays -- by gathering with friends and family, exchanging gifts and stories, and looking to the future with a renewed sense of hope.”

As Shel Leanne discusses the rhetoric characteristics of Obama in her book, *Say it Like Obama*, here it is noticeable that Obama has a strong beginning and demonstrates that in spite of all differences between humankind and especially the two considered nations, there are great values that all have in common. Talking about these concerns attracts public attention at the very beginning.

His expectation for the future was also heroic: “It's a future with renewed exchanges among our people, and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce.” And promising too: “And we can once again call upon this spirit as we seek the promise of a new beginning.” This delineation of the future makes a dynamic image and has a pleasant impact, as the addressee thinks about the good intention of the addresser. “Within these celebrations lies the promise of a new day, the promise of opportunity for our children, security for our families, progress for our communities, and peace between nations. Those are shared hopes, those are common dreams.”

The other strategy he uses to achieve his goal to show the communion is the reference to the well-known poets and great speakers of history, as poetry influences the addressees softly. In this case, he has brought a verse from Iranian poet to emphasize the commonality of humanity. There are those who insist that we be



defined by our differences. But let us remember the words that were written by the poet Saadi, so many years ago: "The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence. With the coming of a new season, we're reminded of this precious humanity that we all share. And we can once again call upon this spirit as we seek the promise of a new beginning.

Using this poem, Obama tries to bring a sense of togetherness and mutual responsibility. In this message, he addresses both the people and the leaders as the same, and implies that he is ready to work at the level of officials to build such a peaceful future: So on the occasion of your New Year, I want you, the people and leaders of Iran, to understand the future that we seek. It's a future with renewed exchanges among our people, and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce. It's a future where the old divisions are overcome, where you and all of your neighbors and the wider world can live in greater security and greater peace. In fact, the emphasis on the leaders of Iran is a kind of recognition of the Iranian state for the first time since 1979.

In the very beginning of this message, president Obama refers to the inappropriate situation of mutual relations between two countries: "For nearly three decades relations between our nations have been strained." Therefore, a sense of inclining toward changing this situation is implied. It seems that the first step is taken by his administration to overcome this historic problem. We have serious differences that have grown over time. My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.

Here he uses a persuasive language as he announces that his administration was "pursuing constructive ties between the United States and Iran." This tone is seen when he talks about Iran's



“rightful place in the community of nations”. A nice tone is a good step and might be perceived as a first step but it seems that the tone has remained here at the very beginning.

He knows how to express his efforts so that his audiences appreciate his efforts in this regard. In fact, the impact of this effort could be demonstrated more clearly when he mentions the difficulties: “We have serious differences that have grown over time. [...] This process will not be advanced by threats. [And] I know that this won't be reached easily.” These sentences imply a need to think more about the means and ways of reconstruction of this already in trouble relation.

He uses a language that Leanne has named the “persuasion technique”; this technique is applied through using the juxtaposition. And it seems that he is going to find the final solution by saying “We know what you're against; now tell us what you're for.” The theme behind such a suggestion tells that there is a great determination to forget about the past and to resolve problems. In other words “we are ready, so you could tell us your concerns.” Hence, readiness is the first step the U.S has taken, which Obama talks about in this message.

March 2010: There are some similarities and consistencies in following the track of the previous themes in the 2010 Nowruz message. Obama once again recounted that he was serious in his offer to renew the mutual relations by asserting “I did so with no illusions (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2010).” The evidence of the sincerity of his speech was U.S acknowledgement of Iran's “right to peaceful nuclear energy.” Once again he implies his readiness to remedy and forget the past hostility: “We are familiar with your grievances from the past – we have our own grievances as well, but we are prepared to move forward.” Once again in a dreamy future for Iran he delineates “where Iranians can exercise their rights, to participate fully in the global economy, and enrich the world through educational and cultural exchanges beyond Iran's borders. That is the future that we seek. That is what America is for.” And



finally once again he tries to draw an air of unity by referring to a famous poet. “Last year, I quoted the words of the poet Saadi, who said: “The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence.” I still believe that – I believe it with every fiber of my being.”

Also, by separating Iran’s people from their government, Obama shows a positive willingness to establish some way to communicate with Iran’s people. That is why, even as we continue to have differences with the Iranian government, we will sustain our commitment to a more hopeful future for the Iranian people. For instance, by increasing opportunities for educational exchanges so that Iranian students can come to our colleges and universities and to our efforts to ensure that Iranians can have access to the software and Internet technology that will enable them to communicate with each other, and with the world without fear of censorship.”

Putting aside these similarities, the differences are showing themselves. So the new themes can be identified in the second message. The most outstanding themes here are “Implying that Iran is responsible for this unwanted situation so it should do something”, “Asserting on not meddling in Iran’s internal affairs while condemning Iran’s policy, and differentiating the Iranian government from the Iranian people.”

In his 2010 Nowruz message, Obama emphasized his acknowledgement of Iran’s “right to peaceful nuclear energy” while he mentioned his consideration at the same time: “we insist only that you adhere to the same responsibilities that apply to other nations.” And this implies that there is no adherence to responsibility shown from Iran, otherwise the U.S is ready to acknowledge its rights.

In spite of the hopeful tone of the previous message, this time the language of differences has been bolded. “Iran’s leaders have sought their own legitimacy through hostility to America. And we continue to have serious differences on many issues.” Therefore the air of friendship tone is substituted by accusing Iran’s leaders of



hostility. This is a shift back to the previous American presidents' policies.

When Obama talks about Iran's policy on refusing "good faith proposals from the international community," he tries to put the responsibility on the shoulder of Iran, and goes on with his "own grievances": "They have turned their backs on a pathway that would bring more opportunity to all Iranians, and allow a great civilization to take its rightful place in the community of nations. Faced with an extended hand, Iran's leaders have shown only a clenched fist." The last metaphor that he has used is very strong and in this way, by an analogy, he thoroughly clarifies what he is trying to imply. While in the first message, his focus is on both sides simultaneously, here in the second message; a blame approach toward one side is shaped.

At the end he concludes that it's all the Iranian government's fault and that it's the side that has to be blamed for the situation. Also the sense of threat is covert in these sentences when he refers to his administration's attempts to convince the international community to stop recognizing Iran's government.

We are working with the international community to hold the Iranian government accountable because they refuse to live up to their international obligations. But our offer of comprehensive diplomatic contacts and dialogue stands. Indeed, over the course of the last year, it is the Iranian government that has chosen to isolate itself, and to choose a self-defeating focus on the past over a commitment to build a better future (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2010)."

He even uses the same poem from Saadi that he had used in his last message to indicate that although he believes in the unity of mankind, and therefore puts his efforts to bring the two nations together; it is Iran's responsibility if there was no progress. "And even as we have differences, the Iranian government continues to have the choice to pursue a better future, and to meet its international responsibilities, while respecting the dignity and fundamental human rights of its own people." This line of reasoning has been used by



Obama on all other occasions in which he has talked about Iran, like his Statement on the 30th Anniversary of the Seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 2009:

This event helped set the United States and Iran on a path of sustained suspicion, mistrust, and confrontation. I have made it clear that the United States of America wants to move beyond this past and seeks a relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran based upon mutual interests and mutual respect. We do not interfere in Iran's internal affairs. We have condemned terrorist attacks against Iran. We have recognized Iran's international right to peaceful nuclear power. We have demonstrated our willingness to take confidence-building steps along with others in the international community. We have accepted a proposal by the International Atomic Energy Agency to meet Iran's request for assistance in meeting the medical needs of its people. We have made clear that if Iran lives up to the obligations that every nation has, it will have a path to a more prosperous and productive relationship with the international community. Iran must choose (Statement on the 30th Anniversary of the Seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, Iran, 2010).

He made this accusation clearer when he sent a message regarding sanctions on Iran to Congress on March 10, 2010, 10 days before his second Nowruz message:

The crisis between the United States and Iran resulting from actions and policies of the Government of Iran that led to the declaration of a national emergency on March 15, 1995, has not been resolved. The actions and policies of the Government of Iran are contrary to the interests of the United States in the region and pose a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. For these reasons, I have determined that it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared with respect to Iran and maintain in force comprehensive sanctions against Iran to respond to this threat (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2010).

Obama addresses Iran's policies after its 2009 presidential



election in his second message, and while he asserts that the U.S does not meddle in Iran's internal affairs, he accuses Iran's government of suppression. He says that not only did America's extended hand face a clenched fist, but Iranians who sought their legal rights were faced with the same situation:

The aspirations of the Iranian people were also met with a clenched fist, as people marching silently were beaten with batons; political prisoners were rounded up and abused; absurd and false accusations were leveled against the United States and the West; and people everywhere were horrified by the video of a young woman killed in the street (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2010)

He interprets this kind of wording as a stance for freedom and humanity.

Our commitment – our responsibility – is to stand up for those rights that should be universal to all human beings. That includes the right to speak freely, to assemble without fear; the right to the equal administration of justice, and to express your views without facing retribution against you or your families. I want the Iranian people to know what my country stands for (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2010).

So explicitly he says that his stance originates from the U.S. commitment for every human being's dignity. The other evident aspect of the shift in this message is a differentiation between the people who claim their rights and the government who confronts them.

Last June, the world watched with admiration, as Iranians sought to exercise their universal right to be heard. But tragically, the aspirations of the Iranian people were also met with a clenched fist, as people marching silently were beaten with batons; political prisoners were rounded up and abused; absurd and false accusations were leveled against the United States and the West; and people everywhere were horrified by the video of a young woman killed in the street.

In other words, here he implies that the government to which



he proposed to have a non-pre condition dialogue does not deserve any negotiations because of its brutalities even towards its own people aside from its old enemy.

March 2011: The changes that have occurred in the third message are both candid and quite obvious. In spite of the first message which by addressing Iranian officials suggested some hope, this time at the very beginning president Obama announces that he is speaking just to the Iranian people. "I have marked this holiday by speaking directly to the people of Iran (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2011)."

The second very immediate change in the message begins by connecting the movements in the Arab countries to the protests in Iran. "But we also know that these movements for change are not unique to these last few months. The same forces of hope that swept across Tahrir Square were seen in Azadi Square in June of 2009."

The tone by which Obama talks about Iran's government in the 2011 message is worse than the earlier message in 2010. "So far, the Iranian government has responded by demonstrating that it cares far more about preserving its own power than respecting the rights of the Iranian people" This time it seems that the division between the people and government which had started last year, is going to be more serious. "For nearly two years, there has been a campaign of intimidation and abuse. Young and old; men and women; rich and poor – the Iranian people have been persecuted." He continues by portraying the Iranian government as being against its own people. This is in clear contrast with his 2009 message in which he put government and the people in the same line: "When a government is so afraid of its own citizens that it won't even allow them the freedom to access information or to communicate with each other (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2011)." This view is continued during the message "the rigid and unaccountable government; the refusal to let the Iranian people realize their full potential for fear of undermining the authority of the state."



By giving concrete examples, he makes the claim about cruel and fearful government more believable.

We have seen Nasrin Sotoudeh jailed for defending human rights; Jaffar Panahi¹ imprisoned and unable to make his films; Abdolreza Tajik thrown in jail for being a journalist. The Baha'i community and Sufi Muslims punished for their faith; Mohammad Valian, a young student, sentenced to death for throwing three stones.

This is while in comparison to the 2009 message, in which he emphasized the opening of a new way to modify the wrong path of the previous era, and even in comparison with his Nowruz message in 2010 - which he had distanced himself from the first message's tone - this message's tone is more sarcastic and accusing.

What is portrayed as the enemy of the Iranian government in this message is the Iranian people, especially the young people who have been born after the Islamic Revolution and are "not bound by the chains of the past." And the future of Iran "belongs to the young people. [...] carry within you both the ancient greatness of Persian civilization, and the power to forge a country that is responsive to your aspirations. Your talent, your hopes, and your choices will shape the future of Iran (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2011)" And in this way "though times may seem dark, I want you to know that I am with you." Here Obama through addressing the young generation tries to assure them of his support and by employing mobilizing ideas stimulates his addresses that they are right to break the rules and regulations of their society. In fact he introduces them as new, fresh youths who carry the chains of the past and now they are free to break these chains. Their encouragement in this way according to Obama would be their ancient civilization and not their moral and religious incentives; a very obvious confrontation of Iranian civilization to Islamic beliefs of people. Murmuring of this idea had also begun inside Iran by some streams; even some officials who revived the distinction of ancient civilization.

In fact, the solution for the improvement of the country as



described by Obama is "distracting hatred of America that will create no jobs or opportunity." In spite of his two previous messages, he very explicitly refers to the hatred towards the U.S. and tries to link the economic problems of Iranian youths with the absence of peaceful relationship with America.

On the whole, the main themes in this message could be considered as showing the ugly face of the Iranian government and encouraging the youth to break up with the past, and building the future of Iran with U.S. support. As the message (2011) was contemporary with the revolutionary movements in Arab countries, Obama provides pathology of those protests and through an analogy links them with Iran's situation, especially after Iran's 2009 presidential election.

But we also know that these movements for change are not unique to these last few months. The same forces of hope that swept across Tahrir Square were seen in Azadi Square in June of 2009. And just as the people of the region have insisted that they have a choice in how they are governed, so do the governments of the region have a choice in their response.

This rhetoric sets Iran in the same circumstances like the upheavals of the Arab countries. He concludes from this analogy that Iran's government like those Arab governments in crisis do not pay any attention to its people.

So far, the Iranian government has responded by demonstrating that it cares far more about preserving its own power than respecting the rights of the Iranian people. For nearly two years, there has been a campaign of intimidation and abuse. Young and old; men and women; rich and poor – the Iranian people have been persecuted. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience are in jail. The innocent have gone missing. Journalists have been silenced. Women tortured. Children sentenced to death".

There is an intentional emphasis on alleged violations of human rights by the Iranian government that highlights the hostile tone



compared to the previous messages. Some activists have referred to this emphasis. "Hypocrisy has been on ample display in the Obama Administration's response to recent developments in the Arab world. Take, for example, President Obama's somewhat strange Nowruz message to the Iranian people this year, issued on March 20, 2011. In the message, Obama repeatedly attacked Iran for alleged human rights violations (Marandi, 2011)."

The next step to prove this claim is to bring proof, documents and examples.

"The world has watched these unjust actions with alarm. We have seen Nasrin Sotoudeh jailed for defending human rights; Jaffar Panahi imprisoned and unable to make his films; Abdolreza Tajik thrown in jail for being a journalist. The Baba'i community and Sufi Muslims punished for their faith; Mohammad Valian a young student, sentenced to death for throwing three stones (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2011)."

These instances can justify why Obama stimulates the Iranian youth to resist their government and confirm his support. Accordingly, protesters in Iran are in the same line with the Arab protesters; weak people tired of their tyrannical government who need a superpower's help.

He believes that such behaviors from the government originate in its weakness. "These choices do not demonstrate strength, they show fear. For it is telling when a government is so afraid of its own citizens that it won't even allow them the freedom to access information or to communicate with each other." By Anticipating weakness of the government, Obama implies that confronting it should not be a difficult job and so transfers his audacity to Iranian youngsters.

Following the first part of the message, which fully discredits the Iranian government, he goes on to address the young people in Iran because of their growing power. "Over 60 percent of the Iranian people were born after 1979. You are not bound by the chains of the past." And they can decide the other way." The future of Iran belongs



to the young people – the youth who will determine their own destiny."

Then the reason why this generation should desire to break up with their government is mentioned as: "the distracting hatred of America that will create no jobs or opportunity; the rigid and unaccountable government; the refusal to let the Iranian people realize their full potential for fear of undermining the authority of the state."

To make a convincing argument that this generation can choose another path, Obama elaborates the potentials that they have. "Instead, you – the young people of Iran – carry within you both the ancient greatness of Persian civilization, and the power to forge a country that is responsive to your aspirations. Your talent, your hopes, and your choices will shape the future of Iran, and help light the world."

Then the final message for Iranian youths is to assure them that there is U.S. power, summarized in the president of the U.S. that supports them. "And though times may seem dark, I want you to know that I am with you."

March 2012: The last Nowruz message of Obama's presidency tries to highlight censorship in Iran. By repeating the phrase "electronic curtain" Obama implies that Iranians are denied from knowing the truth in the world. At the same time he iterates the previous themes. For example, he recounts his respect for the great ancient civilization of Iran that he mentioned in his first message, while dividing the Iranian government from the people as was talked about in the second and third messages.

In an overall look, three themes can be construed from this last message. The first theme is talking about hope and help. Mentioning the unity among the nations, success of Iranian artists and rescuing of captured Iranians by American forces are three examples in his message in this regard. The second theme is condemning Iranian government and accusing it of suppressing its people and denying



their obvious rights and access to information and communication through an “electronic curtain”. The third theme is also promising in terms of delineating U.S. softness. Obama announces U.S. readiness to talk and hold dialogue rather than to take the violent approach. U.S. attempts to help Iran get rid of its supposed electronic curtain and also U.S. initiatives in setting up a virtual embassy are other examples Obama brings up to prove America’s honesty. The fourth message is a partial shift back to a promising future. As in the second and third message, the language is harsh and confronting, but signs of hope for a positive future of relations between the two governments are more feasible.

On 20th March of 2012, Obama used a softer rhetoric compared with the language of his two previous messages, yet similar to the first message. Here he iterates the great and ancient Iranian civilization as he highlighted in his 2009 message. “The Iranian people are the heirs to a great and ancient civilization. Like people everywhere, they have the universal right to think and speak for themselves (Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz, 2012).”

According to Obama, humanity is the common point between America and Iran. “But as people gather with their families, do good deeds, and welcome a new season, we are also reminded of the common humanity that we share.” Therefore “There is no reason for the United States and Iran to be divided from one another”. These arguments are continued by providing practical examples. “And from Facebook to Twitter --- from cell phones to the Internet -- our people use the same tools to talk to one another, and to enrich our lives”.

Showing that genuine and true friendship has been continued between the two nations, Obama mentions two events to support this friendly and helpful atmosphere. “This year, an Iranian production --- “A Separation” --- won America's highest honor for a foreign film. Our navies have confronted the danger of piracy, with U.S. sailors even rescuing Iranian citizens who had been taken hostage.”

This line of argument once again creates a sense of friendship,



hope for the future on the basis of ancient civilization and humanity. These senses provide goodwill and optimism on behalf of U.S. opinion toward the tense relationship with Iran during the recent years.

This part of the message mingled with the optimistic sentences, actually divides the government from the people as it did in the second and the third messages. In spite of the recognition of the Iranian state in the first message, the following trend of the Nowruz messages was to imply disconnection between the government and people. This point is repeated here by accusing the government of suppressing people. “Yet increasingly, the Iranian people are denied the basic freedom to access the information that they want. Instead, the Iranian government jams satellite signals to shut down television and radio broadcasts. It censors the Internet to control what the Iranian people can see and say.”

“Electronic curtain” is the new phrase repeated three times to bold the alleged censorship in Iran. “an electronic curtain has fallen around Iran -- a barrier that stops the free flow of information and ideas into the country, and denies the rest of the world the benefit of interacting with the Iranian people, who have so much to offer.” It further brings back memories of the Soviet Union, which the U.S. always accused of having imposed an “Iron Curtain” to picture the depth of its authoritarianism.

In this part of the message, the U.S. is visualized as the flexible side and pioneer in repairing disagreeable relationships. Obama asserts that although the relations between the two nations have been full of tension, the U.S. is here to help: “I want the Iranian people to know that America seeks a dialogue to hear your views and understand your aspirations,” Accordingly, Obama’s administration would do anything to achieve this dialogue. “That’s why we set up a Virtual Embassy, so you can see for yourselves what the United States is saying and doing. We’re using Farsi on Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus.”



The aim of the United States according to Obama is to help Iranians get rid of the state manufactured censorship, even as the U.S. is imposing sanctions on Iran. “And even as we’ve imposed sanctions on the Iranian government, today, my Administration is issuing new guidelines to make it easier for American businesses to provide software and services into Iran that will make it easier for the Iranian people to use the Internet.” And in this endeavor, the U.S. would get help from other countries as well. “And we hope that others will join us in advancing a basic freedom for the Iranian people: the freedom to connect with one another, and with their fellow human beings.”

The important point in this message in representing the softness of the U.S. is to show that the way is always open for reconciliation with the Iranian government. “Let me say again that if the Iranian government pursues a responsible path, it will be welcomed once more among the community of nations, and the Iranian people will have greater opportunities to prosper.”

By and large, the tone of the fourth Nowruz message seems to be softer than the second and third messages.

II- U.S. Politics and Rhetoric Shift

The roots of the introduction of these new themes, aside from the effects of the background of mutual relationships between the two countries, to some extent lie in the events taken place during this period. During this time interval, those hopes and estimations continued but like a pendulum, and of course it was growing weaker as time passed by. During this period of time, President Obama was confronted with “inherited” problems at home such as the economic crisis and following it, a high rate of unemployment as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The other domestic challenges were in Congress. Obama required a lot of consolidation with the opposition party in the Congress, which was opposing his foreign policy too. The Republicans had decided to cripple him through rejection of his bills, with Obama’s healthcare reform being one of them.



Last but not least, he was surrounded by pro-Israeli lobbies that affected his position, whether he was in agreement with them from the beginning or was affected by their opinion during this time.

On the other hand, in Iran, things were not static as well. Two important issues arose during this time in Iran that can be considered as the most significant and influential events that played an effective role on reestablishing the broken relations. The first one was Iran's presidential election held in June 2009 and the following unrest in Iran's cities. This event led to the U.S. conclusion that Iran's government is not democratic, and this position darkened the already dark relationships. The other issue was the reinvigoration of nuclear activities in Iran. This endeavor from Iran turned to become an excuse to renew the previous historical clashes. Also, from a wider perspective, the events taking place in Arab countries in 2010-11 were another factor that affected a change in the third Nowruz message's tone. Obama made a link between the unrest in Iran after its presidential election and the public movements in Arab countries, namely Egypt. With the help of rallies attended mostly by the youth in these countries, Obama addressed the young generation in Iran and induced them to have their say by breaking up from the government. Actually, comparing these three messages, it is amazing to witness the recognition of Iran's government in the first message, and in the third one, Obama's encouraging of the Iranian people to turn their back on their government. Analyzing this approach according to soft power would explain this change.

A brief survey of the important issues inside the U.S. may provide perspective on the internal conditions that led to the change in Obama's policy of Change. Assuming that Obama intended to implement real change in his foreign policy, there have been various obstacles on his way forward. Although the US domestic processes are usually too complicated to draw a straightforward conclusion based on them (Mousavi and Nouruzi, 2010), it is clear that the U.S. president is not capable of creating significant changes by himself.



This argument can be applied to Obama as well. He could not make a serious change regarding the U.S. - Iran relationship without the consensus of other players in U.S. policymaking such as Congress, the Judiciary, lobbies - the pro-Israel lobby in particular - and public opinion directed by the media. Getting such a consensus is not as easy as it was uttered in verbal statements. This is while Iran has rejected any demand to give up its regional policies and to ignore its challenge to the existing international system.

Nevertheless, if he really wanted to be transformative and sought fundamental change, he would act differently from what he has done during his presidency. Robert Kuttner, who has comprehensively studied Obama's challenges in his book *Obama's Challenge, America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency*, argues that:

Barack Obama approaches the Presidency at a critical moment in American history, facing simultaneous crises of war, the environment, health care, but most especially in the economy. If he is able to rise to the moment, he could join the ranks of a small handful of previous presidents who have been truly transformative, succeeding in fundamentally changing our economy, society, and democracy for the better. But this will require imaginative and decisive action as Obama takes office, action bolder than he has promised during his campaign, and will be all the more difficult given the undertow of conventional wisdom in Washington and on Wall Street that resists fundamental change. Decades of regressive politics and political gridlock have left America in its most precarious situation since the onset of the Great Depression. The collapse of the housing bubble continues, as does the financial meltdown it triggered; a revival of 1970s style stagflation threatens; incomes continue to lag behind inflation; our household and international debts pile higher; disastrous climate change looms; energy and food prices continue their escalation; and the ranks of un- and under-insured Americans grow as the health insurance system unravels (Kuttner, 2008).



Faced with these inherited problems, the room for focusing on new slogans would be narrower. The other way in which these problems may be influential in changing Obama's initial positive approach toward Iran is that the president has to compromise with different groups and lobbies to implement his domestic policies. Therefore, the president could have some agreements with the opposing side and provide some advantages in other areas, like the area of foreign policy, to be able to take their supportive positive vote regarding internal issues. In fact, Obama's promises about policy regarding Iran was anathema to some main players in the policy making system. Obama was later forced to comply with the opposing side and use these promises as a tool to bargain over domestic issues in Congress and get their consent in passing bills such dealing with issues such as healthcare reform or compromising with them over efforts to deal with America's financial crisis.

As elaborated in the article "Modelling the US Foreign Policy Decision Making Process: The Case of Israel"

The structure of American foreign policy decision making process is one which enables interest groups to influence the process; the pro-Israeli interest groups have been successful in using such means effectively. Pro-Israel individuals have managed to direct their wealth into PACs, political parties, the media, universities, think tanks and lobby groups. Through this management of wealth, they have influenced political decisions that are made in America, and since their cause is a foreign one, their efforts are mainly focused on foreign policy decisions. The success of the pro-Israeli interest groups in the United States is rooted in the fact that they have invested on all institutions and processes, and they have used all means available for influencing the elements shaping the US decision making system (Mousavi, Kadkhodae and Shafiee, 2009).

The executive branch including its bureaucracy is one of the most important elements in the U.S. foreign policy decision-making system. While the pro-Israel lobby is extremely active in Congress, in election financing, focused voting, punishing politicians who act



against Israeli interests, it is interesting that the pro-Israel lobbies are active in the executive branch too. This is noticeable when considering the presence of all U.S. presidential candidates at the annual AIPAC conference, where they openly support Israel and show extreme sympathy toward the Israeli cause to gain Jewish support. As President Jimmy Carter puts it, no U.S. presidential candidate can run for office unless he or she shows open allegiance to Israel².

According to Mearsbemer and Walt, the Israeli lobby influences the executive branch by supporting their candidates in elections, through appointing key members in important places in the government, and making sure that anti-Israeli politicians get nowhere near these places. And whenever the interest group is not satisfied with the appointments made by a president, they use their sources of pressure such as the media to change things (Mousavi, Kadkbodae and Shafiee, 2009).

Based on this argument, it doesn't seem strange that Obama - who has announced readiness for a non pre-condition dialogue with Iran - follows a pragmatist policy by partially returning back to previous strategies by appointing Denis Ross as his advisor on the Middle East and Iran. Ross worked with George H Bush. He is a scholar, diplomat and an activist at the the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) with a background of hostility towards Iran, which has not been covert. As a fellow at WINEP, Ross believes that the United States must communicate closely with Israel about Iran. In his view, Bush followed weak stick and weak carrot policies regarding Iran, so its approach failed. So he initially suggests: "We need strong sticks to concentrate the Iranian mind on what they stand to lose, and we need strong carrots, conveyed directly, to show the Iranians they have something to gain by giving up their nuclear weapon pursuit (Ross, 2010)." As a matter of fact, the pro-Israeli lobbies, of which Ross is a leader, have always proposed to take tougher measures against Iran. Ross predicted such measures even before Obama came to the White House.



Actually Ross is not alone in this stage. As Robert Dreyfuss, freelance investigative journalist, has noticed:

When it comes to Iran, however, it's far too early to dismiss the hawks. To be sure, they are now plying their trade from outside the corridors of power, but they have more friends inside the Obama camp than most people realize. Several top advisers to Obama -- including Tony Lake, UN Ambassador-designate Susan Rice, Tom Daschle, and Dennis Ross, along with leading Democratic hawks like Richard Holbrooke, close to Vice-President-elect Joe Biden or Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton -- have made common cause with war-minded think-tank hawks at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and other hardliner institutes (Dreyfuss, 2008).

Therefore, noticing that President Obama should listen to the pro-Israel lobby and rely on consulting such advisors, it can be concluded that although he proposes new ways and tactics to deal with Iran, he is continuing the path of his predecessors. Basically, "What is clear is that the American decision making system is a complex one, and this complexity gives more power to the forces of continuity compared to change ones. This continuous system is unlikely to undergo serious changes through the influence of one single element or person, i.e. the President (Mousavi , Kadkhodae and Shafiee, 2009)."

III- Iranian Politics and Non-Compromise Policy

While President Obama was engaged in domestic challenges, some events occurred in Iran that influenced his promising tone in the first message to Iranians.

Iran's presidential election in June 2009 was followed by some months of unrest and a volatile period in Iran, especially in Tehran. It seemed that the adherents of the lost candidate did not accept the result of the election and this dispute led to violent and bloody demonstrations in Tehran, resulting in the killing of some innocent people. The reaction of President Obama to this internal event, while



being very reluctant compared to European leaders at the initial stage, was to accuse the government of being responsible for the bloody events, and urge the Iranian people to be sure that the U.S. is standing with them. In June 2009, nearly three months after the first promising Nowruz message, he said in a statement “The Iranian government must understand that the world is watching. We mourn each and every innocent life that is lost. We call on the Iranian government to stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people. The universal rights to assembly and free speech must be respected, and the United States stands with all who seek to exercise those rights (White House.gov, 2009).”

In response to the question “Your administration has said that the offer to talk to Iran's leaders remains open. Can you say if that's still so, even with all the violence that has been committed by the government against the peaceful protesters? And if it is, is there any red line that your administration won't cross where that offer will be shut off?” he said:

Well, obviously what's happened in Iran is profound. And we're still waiting to see how it plays itself out. My position coming into this office has been that the United States has core national security interests in making sure that Iran doesn't possess a nuclear weapon and it stops exporting terrorism outside of its borders. We have provided a path whereby Iran can reach out to the international community, engage, and become a part of international norms. It is up to them to make a decision as to whether they choose that path. What we've been seeing over the last several days, the last couple of weeks, obviously is not encouraging, in terms of the path that this regime may choose to take. And the fact that they are now in the midst of an extraordinary debate, taking place in Iran may end up coloring how they respond to the international community as a whole (White house.gov, 2009).

These sorts of developments in both countries and the following statements and counter-statements from the two sides



proved those optimists who anticipated a happy ending after hearing the first Nowruz message wrong. It also showed that the bilateral problem is very deep rooted and cannot be resolved simply by changing rhetoric. Patrick Seale, a leading British writer on the Middle East, believes that the interfering in Iran's domestic affairs has not been a right choice for the Obama administration. He writes:

Worse still, Obama and his Secretary of State Hilary Clinton are now openly interfering in internal Iranian politics -- something they wisely refrained from doing at the time of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's contested re-election a year ago. Last week Obama urged the world to support the Iranian people in their fight for 'freedom', while Clinton accused the Iranian regime of repressing its people, manipulating elections, exporting terrorism and pursuing nuclear weapons. "This adds up," she said, "to a very dangerous combination (Seale, 2010).

However, Obama went further back to the old U.S. policy on Iran when he delivered a bill to Congress, passing a budget for breaking what he called censorship in Iran and funding some radio stations to feed public diplomacy in Iran. Compared with the European stance, however, the U.S. stance - especially in the the first days of unrest in Iran in 2009 - was more cautious and softer, as if U.S. hesitated to abolish all the endeavors it had showed during the previous months. Nonetheless, in Iran, the response to these policies galvanized the pessimistic view that any call to engage in renewing the relationship with the U.S. was inferred as a measure against the Islamic Revolution's interests.

While Obama's initial policies regarding Iran (i.e. the first Nowruz message, initial reluctance to take a position against the Iranian government following the election turmoil) was anathema to hardliners in the U.S. and were assumed as a shift away from America's previous policies, in Iran, those same measures were implied as new deception and a trick to fool it. Therefore, Iranian state reactions toward this new trend by the U.S. froze those nascent metamorphosing ideas. When a few months later, Obama issued



harsh criticism on Iran's 'human rights abuses' during the election turmoil, in Iran, this was taken as proof of the claim that Obama's 'change' on Iran was nothing other than deception.

According to a report by the Congressional Research Service:

The recent public controversy over Iran's nuclear program began in August 2002, when the National Council of Resistance on Iran (NCRI), an Iranian exile group, revealed information during a press conference (some of which later proved to be accurate) that Iran had built nuclear related facilities at Natanz and Arak that it had not revealed to the IAEA. The United States had been aware of at least some of these activities, according to knowledgeable former officials (Kerr, 2009).

The reaction of the U.S. towards Iran's nuclear activities was harsh and threatening. According to Mousavi & Nouruzi (2010):

Since 2003, the United States has alleged that Iran has a program with the aim of developing nuclear weapons. Iran has maintained that its nuclear program is peaceful and aims only at generating electricity. The United States' official position on Iran has been that a nuclear-armed Iran is not acceptable and that 'all options' - including the unilateral use of force and first-strike nuclear weapons - are on the table. However, they have denied on various occasions that the United States is preparing for an imminent strike (Mousavi and Norouzi, 2010).

In response to the American threats, Iran refused to suspend work on its uranium enrichment and heavy-water nuclear reactor programs during the following years. Through U.S. and European pressure, let alone Israeli efforts, the Iranian nuclear dossier was passed to the UN Security Council and several resolutions, which imposed sanctions on Tehran, were adopted. The Bush administration denied any direct negotiations on the nuclear issue unless Iran accepted the Security Council resolutions and froze all uranium enrichment. This put US-Iran relations into a new dangerous phase, on the edge of violent confrontation. By December 2008,



president-elect Obama made it clear that “his policy toward Iran would be different from Bush’s policy of confrontation and would be to ratchet up tough but direct diplomacy with Iran.” In 2009, contrary to initial promises, Obama’s policy of unconditional negotiations with Iran ran into serious difficulty due to the growing pressure of conservative political quarters and lobbies on the one hand and Iran’s suspicion toward U.S. policies (Mousavi and Norouzi, 2010).

The climax of conflict between Iran and the U.S. regarding the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program during the Obama administration was in September 2009, when Iran informed the IAEA that it was constructing a second enrichment facility at an underground location at Fordo, near Qom. Four days after Iran revealed the existence of this facility; it was criticized for concealing a nuclear facility from the IAEA. This development led to a high-profile joint press conference at the G-8 summit (on September 25th) in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, by President Obama, President Sarkozy of France, and Prime Minister Brown of Britain. The U.S. accused Iran of secrecy: “our information is that the Iranians began this facility with the intent that it be secret, and therefore giving them an option of producing weapons-grade uranium without the international community knowing about it (Jahn, 2009).”

However Iranian officials have repeated that the country’s nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes. For example, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i declared during a June 3, 2008, speech that Iran is opposed to nuclear weapons “based on religious and Islamic beliefs as well as based on logic and wisdom.” He added, “Nuclear weapons have no benefit but high costs to manufacture and keep them. Nuclear weapons do not bring power to a nation because they are not applicable. Nuclear weapons cannot be used (Kerr, 2008).”

Despite its defiance, a proposal from Iran surprised the Geneva meeting on 1 October 2009. Iran proposed to swap its low-enriched uranium with the higher enriched fuel needed for the Tehran



Research Reactor. The adoption of a strong-worded resolution by the UNSC and further unilateral sanctions by the U.S. and EU have further muddied the atmosphere and pushed America to take distance from Obama's initial policy of dialogue. Although the IAEA on occasion, such as in its report on September 17, 2009 and U.S. intelligence reports in 2009 and 2011, reiterate that there is no concrete proof that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons, the conflicts between Iran and the U.S. over Iran's nuclear program have continued. The lack of trust between Tehran and Washington has dominated the nuclear negotiations as well. It seems that neither side believes the other side and its sincerity. "The main problem is the absence of mutual trust between the two countries which has forced both of them to opt for a decision in their nuclear game with the highest cost for the other side (Mousavi and Norouzi, 2010:146)." Later, as the West rejected Iran's request for 20% enriched fuel rods for the Tehran nuclear facility for medical use, Iran announced its production of such fuel, using locally-made second generation centrifuge. It further built 4th generation centrifuges, pushing the Western countries to possibly accept Iran's pursuit of peaceful nuclear technology, with limited uranium enrichment. This was the theme of the Istanbul (April 2012) and Baghdad (May 2012) nuclear talks. If this is going to be the case, it is the best solution for this apparently unsolvable problem, as Mousavi & Norouzi (2010:145) suggest, that the U.S. government accepts "a civilian nuclear program inside Iran [even limited] while ensuing effective international monitoring of Iranian nuclear facilities."

IV- Overall Assessment

In Concluding, Three points need to be considered: 1- Obama's intention for change, 2- Institutionalized mistrust and 3- Shift back.

Based on the assumption that Obama's intention for 'change' is genuine, it seems that Obama's 'change' policy on Iran is a shift in form; change in content should be started from the other side. Hence,



any practical 'change' in U.S. policy on Iran requires a major shift in Iran's foreign policy first. Thus, Obama's change is to remove previous pre-conditions for negotiation, in which Iran agrees to withdraw from various foreign policy directives that cause American concerns. For Iranians, the Obama administration has understood the extent to which the Bush-Cheney approach to Iran (not to talk to Iran) essentially gave a free pass to the Iranian state. As John Lee Anderson has written in the *New Yorker*, "it was easy for [Iranian President] Ahmadinejad to argue that President Bush was not interested in anything but a hostile relationship with Iran (Mousavi and Norouzi, 2010:146)" but surely, this has not been the case to similarly argue against President Obama and his team. They refer to his election campaign as rhetoric' against Iran (2008) as well as his third and fourth Nowruz messages (2011-2012) and compare them with his first message (2009) to prove their claim. Obama's first Nowruz message was "a game-changer," Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues: "Now the U.S. has come out with an extraordinarily different kind of message, one that is warm, and seems sincere about engaging with Iran. So the Iranians now will ask of their government, why aren't you engaging?" He adds, "Obama has cleverly created a debate between the Iranian people and their leaders, and within the leadership itself - and also, because this comes just three months before the elections, made it a campaign issue (Duss, 2009)." Hence, early change in the rhetoric of Obama's administration was just a change in the game's rules to engage global public opinion.

He implied hopeful themes in his first Nowruz message to the Iranian people. Obama engaged Iranian public opinion in his new public diplomacy. He talked about common and shared values to his audience (the Iranian people) and allowed them to think that they were the other part of the political equation. These assumptions made them engage and prepare a receptive situation, as the language was soft and they did not assume that the situation was hostile. Therefore,



in a negotiation, in addition to referring to the hard power at hand, the opportunity to impose their means is more likely. To gain global consensus behind the U.S., Obama tried to talk soft on Iran, and as Iran requested action rather than talk, he was able to show to the Western world that Iran is not responding to reconciliation offered by America. This was necessary for any physical and violent action against Iran. Obama could draw the attention of the world public opinion to his side. Then, with the global legitimacy that he could acquire in this way, making accusations against the enemy was more acceptable, especially with global media in America's possession. In this case, approving economic and financial sanctions against Iran at the United Nations acquired a reasonable justification. It can be said that what happened from March 2009 till 2012 had been a combination of attempting to mend the broken ties between the two countries on the one hand and endeavor to influence global public opinion, as well as drawing Iranian people's attention toward the soft power of the U.S. on the other. While there appeared a few promising changes in the U.S. approach toward Iran in the first Nowruz message, there was no continuation of change in Obama's policies compared to the previous administrations.

Hence, U.S. policy on Iran might have changed in terms of tactics to deal with Iran, but will not change on how Iran is perceived. In his speech on the 4 of June 2008 at the AIPAC Policy Conference, Obama argued that:

Now there's no greater threat to Israel or to the peace and the stability of the region than Iran. This audience is made up of both Republicans and Democrats and the enemies of Israel should have no doubt that regardless of party, Americans stand shoulder to shoulder in our commitment to Israel's security, so while I don't want to strike a two-partisan a note here today I do want to address some willful mischaracterizations of my position. The Iranian regime supports violent extremists and challenges us across the region. It pursues a nuclear capability that could spark a dangerous arms race and raise the



prospect of a transfer of nuclear know-how to terrorists. Its President denies the Holocaust and threatens to wipe Israel off the map. The danger from Iran is grave; it is real; and my goal will be to eliminate this threat (Obama speech at AIPAC Policy Conference, 2008).”

Such an approach towards Iran by Obama, for the Iranians, has been nothing but a soft power policy. “Power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes you want, and you can do that through coercion or payment, which is what I call hard power, or you could do it with attraction, which is what I call soft power. Now it is very rare that people use entirely soft power or entirely hard power. I suppose Dalai Lama uses entirely soft power, but most of the actors end up using a combination of hard and soft power and the ability to combine hard and soft power—carrots and sticks and attractions—is what I call smart power”. (Joseph Nye) (Barzegar, 2008) For Nye, “Obama's election itself has done a great deal to restore American soft power, but he will need to follow up with policies that combine hard and soft power into a smart strategy of the sort that won the Cold War (Nye, 2008)”.

However, this line of argument, which is pervasive in both countries, is rooted in the depth of institutionalized mistrust. Bilateral relations between Iran and United States have fluctuated over the past thirty years; however, they've constantly deteriorated. The U.S. has assumed various policies including ‘Containment’, ‘Behavior Change’, ‘Regime Change’ and ‘Engagement’ on Iran. In most part, American policy has been changing between or been a combination of these policies to control Iran or to bring Iran back to the international community, a community which has rules overseen by the hegemonic powers. As described in the article, the relationship between Iran and America has continuously been marked by confrontation. Wherever in the Middle East the United States defined hegemonic interests, Iran was there: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the occupation of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the Arab uprisings, the security of energy in the Persian Gulf, the Saudi-Qatari involvement in Syria on the U.S.



behalf, are some cases in question.

These clashes and challenging points have provided new opportunities for dialogue as well. Unfortunately, mutual interests such as Iraq, Afghanistan, energy security, etc., have been the scene of only rare dialogue between the two countries. Major efforts to resolve even the deep differences between the two countries have not been successful. Neither government has been ready to back down from its position. The U.S., as the superpower, has never imagined backing down from its position versus a middle-power country such as Iran, while Iran has been successful in challenging the United States supremacy for the past three decades. For Iran, its stability, independence, and security have been constantly challenged by the United States. There are forces in both countries that view any rapprochement as a sign of weakness, but there are also some other countries who have benefited from the worsening relation between Iran and the United States. Some of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have moved closer to the U.S. administration through aggrandizing the supposed Iranian threat. Furthermore, EU, Russian and Chinese governments on different occasions have used the Iranian card extensively, either to bargain with the US or to bargain with Iran. Hence, in studying U.S.-Iran relations, one should look at the foreign elements as well.

Hence, regardless of the rare dialogue and cooperation between the two, no solution other than a comprehensive one is viable; cooperation which could cover unresolved issues including the security of the Iranian state as well as America's concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Without an all-inclusive policy for a wide-ranging solution, good rhetoric will remain short-lived, no matter how promising it is and how genuine its intentions are. Hence, Obama took the unprecedented step of communicating with his old enemies and expressed that not talking to enemies was not wise. Recognizing the Islamic Republic and addressing its leaders for the first time after the Islamic Revolution could be considered as a great improvement



when reviewing the history of the broken ties between the two countries, but it is far short of a solution.

The fourth Nowruz message (March 2012) is a clear shift back from the third one. Although it criticizes the Iranian government as in the previous message, it does not use confronting language and no-hope tone as in the second and third messages. This softness is partly due to the fact that the U.S. presidential election is going to take place in a few months' time, and Obama needs a show of success in his foreign policy. Opposing the Republican presidential nominees' proposal for an attack on Iran as unmeasured and unprofessional, Obama needs a scenario to show that his no-war but tighter sanctions' policies against Iran are working and paralyzing the Iranian system. It seems that Obama, to win the election, needs to be tough on Iran. His choice, to this point, has been to avoid confrontation while being extremely punitive and seeking extensive, collective and selective sanctions on Iran. Nonetheless, not only does doubt exist on the applicability of such measures, but also, there are ample facts to show that these measures have not been able to paralyze Iran and that Iran continues its peaceful nuclear path.

The fourth message is concurrent with the nuclear negotiations in Istanbul in April 2012: A crucial meeting between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (United States, France, UK, Russia and China) and Germany on Iran's atomic activities. Hence, Obama through his fourth Nowruz message, tried to set a promising scene somehow similar to the first Nowruz message in 2009. In reality, this temporal positive atmosphere has worked. The Istanbul meeting is one of the rare positive occasions in the current history of negotiations between the two countries (direct or indirect). It seems that both governments are in need of such a constructive and positive atmosphere, though each one for a different reason.

Notes

1. Interestingly, Jafar Panahi is the one filmmaker who was shackled by US police in JFK airport in New York, in his arrival to receive his prize from a Film Festival and was deported out of US.
2. Interview, Aljazeera (English)

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