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Broadening the U.S. Approach on Iran

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With Iran's September 14 acceptance of a meeting with the P5+1 countries on October 1, the Obama administration finally appears poised to engage in direct talks with Iran. In entering these talks, Washington faces two obstacles: first, Iran's reputation for recalcitrance in negotiations and its stated refusal to discuss the nuclear issue, upon which American concerns center; and second, the perception that the administration is lending legitimacy to a regime fresh from violent repression of its political opponents. The former challenge is not new, and overcoming it will require increased U.S. pressure on the regime to convince its leaders that their interests are best served at the negotiating table. The challenge of avoiding legitimizing Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's government, however, has taken on added importance in light of the controversy over Iran's June 12 presidential elections. If Washington is to avoid a worst-case scenario -- a negotiation that fails to resolve the nuclear issue yet strengthens the Iranian regime -- it should consider expanding the scope of its engagement with Iran.

Background

The Bush administration made several attempts at dialogue with Iran, but it also promoted human rights and criticized the regime's policies. During his U.S. presidential campaign, Barack Obama panned the Bush approach and, upon entering the White House, reversed it in hopes of creating a more conciliatory tone in the U.S.-Iran relationship. The president reportedly sent two confidential letters to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei and used messages on Nowruz and other occasions to address the Iranian leadership directly. Obama has hesitated to reach around the regime to the Iranian people, confining his actions to cautious statements in the aftermath of Iran's presidential elections and eliminating the Iran Democracy Fund created in 2006 to promote Iranian civil society. In this regard, he has largely returned to a traditional U.S. approach to Iran, characterized by direct, narrow, and often behind-the-scenes overtures. Nevertheless, the Iranian regime, thus far, has proven no more responsive to Obama's overtures than to previous U.S. efforts.

After Iran's controversial June 12 presidential elections, the U.S. approach shifted from active outreach to a more passive stance; public statements from Washington neither closed the door to talks nor actively solicited them. Instead, the administration indicated the need for an Iranian response before the September 24 meeting of the G-20, and officials stepped up warnings of tough new sanctions. When it came, Iran's proposal was long overdue and unresponsive to international demands. While conventional wisdom suggests that Iran was distracted from the nuclear issue by its domestic turmoil, the timing and nature of its response were, in fact, largely in keeping with its practice over the last several years. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov welcomed the Iranian proposal and dampened hopes for new sanctions, stating that sanctions on oil and oil products "would not be supported by the UN Security Council." Indeed, Washington's acceptance of Iran's offer for talks may have as much to do with securing Russian and Chinese acquiescence for sanctions or more forceful action in the future as it does with any hope that Iran will budge on its nuclear program.

A Broader Approach to Engagement

Whatever the Obama administration's motivation for embracing the Iranian offer, talks with Iran offer little

hope and pose significant risk. Although Iran has readily accepted talks with the United States in the past -- whether to enhance its stature in the region or to relieve political pressure -- it has not appeared interested in genuine progress in U.S.-Iran relations. Currently, Iran may be seeking international legitimacy and de facto absolution for its harsh crackdown on political opponents. To avoid such an outcome, respected Iranian rights activists, such as Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, have counseled the West against any talks with Ahmadinezhad's government in the wake of the disputed June 12 elections.

Although the White House made clear after the crackdown that the nuclear issue remains its top priority, the unlikely prospect that talks will actually produce a breakthrough on this issue underscores the need to mitigate the negotiation's adverse impact on Iran's newly emboldened political opposition. The White House, therefore, needs to ensure that its representatives raise human rights issues in any meetings with Iranian officials and that these concerns are echoed in U.S. public statements. Although this approach may be perceived as distracting from U.S. strategic interests, it is based on successful precedents -- the United States, for example, campaigned for human rights in the Soviet bloc while engaging Moscow in arms control talks -- and would preserve U.S. credibility with the Iranian people and others in the region and beyond, which is itself a valuable strategic asset. Raising human rights issues would also underscore that violations of international norms carry consequences. Washington should stress that it is not seeking a private arrangement with the regime's leaders at the expense of the Iranian people. If the United States appears unclear about its principles or indifferent to the suffering of Iranians, their goodwill toward America will certainly diminish.

To broaden the scope of its engagement, the United States should consider taking the following steps in parallel with any talks with Iran's leadership:

Elevate the international profile of Iranian human rights. Washington could use major international forums such as the UN General Assembly, or meetings in bilateral or multilateral settings with Iranian opposition politicians and rights activists, to move the issue of human rights in Iran higher on the international agenda. Members of the executive branch and Congress, as well as prominent private citizens, could aid such an effort.

Boost funding for U.S.-Iran cultural exchanges and U.S. broadcasting to Iran. Although cultural exchanges and Persian-language broadcasting may directly reach only a relatively small number of the elite, their indirect impact may be far greater. Visits by sports teams, such as the Iranian national basketball team's May 2008 visit to Salt Lake City, receive a great deal of attention in Iran. International broadcasting, likewise, provides one of the only unbiased sources of news available to the Iranian public, and the information conveyed can be passed on through multiple channels.

Publicize offers made to the Iranian regime. Although private overtures and discussions are vital in diplomacy, they can also give rise to suspicion and apprehension in Iran and the region. Given the stakes and the likelihood that the Iranian regime will be opaque, the administration should be as transparent as possible in the course of any negotiations with Iran, in part to give the Iranian people a clear picture of what the regime is refusing. In the same vein, the United States and the P5+1 group of countries should increase the publicity given to the incentives proposed to Iran.

Conclusion

In the short run, broadening the scope of U.S. engagement with Iran will help avoid legitimizing the dubiously elected Ahmadinezhad government and dealing a blow to Iran's newly energized opposition. This approach aims more realistically at reducing the fallout from negotiations with the Iranian regime than at boosting the administration's chances of success. In the longer run, better U.S.-Iran relations depend on broader engagement -- one that is not exclusively focused on the regime. While Iran's regime elite have a vested interest in the status quo and little interest in U.S.-Iran reconciliation, the evidence suggests that the Iranian people feel quite the opposite; indeed, all of Iran's presidential challengers, even hardliner Mohsen Rezai, speak in favor of improved bilateral relations. When U.S. officials finally sit down with their Iranian counterparts to commence negotiations, they should keep in mind that those Iranians who have been denied a

seat at the table may hold the key to overcoming three decades of U.S.-Iran hostility.

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