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The Tehran-Washington Talks Dilemma and Possible Scenarios

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Introduction

Following three decades of mutual verbal attacks and threats of violence, Tehran and Washington are reviving hope for diplomatic talks. This is not the first time that Tehran and Washington engaged in diplomacy since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, as the two resorted to talks during two international crises; the first was during the war on Afghanistan in 2001 (wherein the two countries admitted to limited negotiations within the scope of the so-called war on terror and battling Al Qaeda activities), and the second was concerning Iraqi security, where the two countries' ambassadors met in Baghdad for talks which did not yield any results.

on the occasions when the United States and Iran have come to the negotiation table, it has been over a specific issue, normally an American demand. For example, their negotiations over Iraqi security came as a direct result of the Baker-Hamilton Report¹ which stressed the important role played by Iraq's neighbors in Iraqi security. The report called on Washington to pay attention to certain countries, namely Iran and Syria. Washington sent Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns to a meeting between Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, and the European Union in July 2008,² but no actual relationship was established between Burns and Jalili, or at least none was reported.

American-Iranian relations after the Islamic Revolution have been defined by their escalatory nature which results from both country's perception of the other – a situation which has led to lack of trust and a widening gap between the two states. Consequently, even considering diplomacy as an option has alarming political and security externalities in both countries – so much so that the NIC report³ issued in November 2007 -- which confirmed that Iran has halted its military nuclear activities-- did not succeed in changing the general political mood in Washington. This fear of diplomacy can be better illustrated if we remember two important factors: firstly, the prerequisites set by each party which prevented comprehensive talks (the American condition that Iran halt all of its uranium enrichment activities before negotiations can start, and the Iranian demand of a change of American comportment towards it and the return of all Iranian finances frozen by Washington.) Second, setting high expectations for elections and linking election results to talks has proven problematic, if results do not appeal to either party then talks are dismissed. This chronic fear of diplomacy was further intensified by the countries' inability to achieve much through their limited talks and their mutual feeling that each party is being inflexible – all of which has led to frustration.

It should also be noted regarding previous American-Iranian talks is that they were bilateral or hosted by a third party which did not enjoy true political leverage to broker agreements, which leads us to consider the role that can be played by a third party in Iranian-American negotiations.

1 http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf

2 <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/16/us.iran/index.html>, 16 July 2008.

3 http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf, November 2007

This paper proposes the hypothesis that the United States and Iran have, even if temporarily, managed to look beyond their prejudiced and negative perceptions of each other, and that they are serious about pursuing a diplomatic course to solve their disagreements. The paper will first tackle American-Iranian disagreements, then move on to analyze the importance of the timing of their negotiations, and whether or not they should wait until after the Iranian elections in June 2009. Thirdly, it will analyze the caliber of a potential diplomatic mediator between the two countries, and will present some conclusions.

Reasons of Disagreement

During the Munich Security Conference held in early February 2009, Ali Larijani, chairman of the Iranian parliament, summarized the points of disagreement between his country and the United States from the Iranian perspective as being the negative role of the U.S. upon the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1953, American exploitation of Iranian resources during the reign of the Shah, and Washington's freezing of Iranian assets. Tehran also maintains that Washington is actively involved in weakening the Iranian regime through its policies of economic and political isolation, in addition to actions (considered aggressive by Iran) aiming to topple the Iranian regime. In this regard, it should be mentioned that Washington's decision to keep the anti-Khomeini-ist organization Mojahedin-e-Khalq on its list of terrorist organizations placate Iran's concerns of reported American protection of MEK in Iraq since 2003.

Washington, on the other hand, summarized its points of disagreement with Tehran in the words of president Barack Obama and Joe Biden in their foreign policy agenda published on the White House website¹ as being Iranian nuclear ambitions, threatening of Israeli security, and offering financial support to organizations considered terrorist or extremist by Washington, such as Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Another post-2003 point of disagreement added by Washington was the Iranian role in Iraq. The American vice-president Joe Biden reiterated these points in the Munich Security Conference and offered direct talks with Iran, but he also stressed that Iran needs to meet international demands or suffer more international isolation.²

These differences dominate American-Iranian relations to a degree that forced Washington to exhaust all options (except military action) in order to force Iran to change its position. Five UN Security Council resolutions were issued against Iran's nuclear program: 1969, 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1835, none of which stopped Iran's uranium enrichment activities. On the contrary, they led Iran to increase the number of its centrifuges to 6000 and to produce around 3000 tons of UF₆³ an important component in the uranium fuel enrichment process in its Isfahan nuclear facility. In tandem with this development relations among the Washington-led coalition against Iran weakened and the United State's relationship with Russia deteriorated after the Russo-Georgian war. Consequently, Russia has announced that it will activate the Iranian Bushehr nuclear plant by the end of 2009.⁴

1 http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy/ 2 February 2009

2 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/02/07/world/main4782391.shtml?source=RSS&tr=HOME_4782391, 7 February 2009

3 Iran produces 300 tons of UF₆ in nuclear facility, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2008-01/28/content_6423755.htm, 28 January 2008

4 It seems the U.S. lacks accurate information about Iran's renewed efforts to have a nuclear program for military purposes. That is clear in the assessment handed by the Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, where a notable change of tone is found. Blair mentions that Iran «is clearly developing all the components of nuclear material», whereas in the past American politicians ascertained that «Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program.» <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/12/dni.threats/index.html#cnSTCText>, 12 February 2009

When Will Talks Begin?

The timing of any sort of talks between Washington and Tehran will be crucial. The fact that president Barack Obama took the White House in January 2009, and that Iran is preparing for its 10th presidential elections in June 2009 allow for two options: The first option is that any potential talks be postponed until after the Iranian elections, i.e. until August or whenever the new Iranian president takes office, assuming that the elections will require a runoff as in 2005. Such a wait might lead the new Iranian president to decrease his focus on American-Iranian affairs in favor of a focus on the country's domestic issues. The same is also true for the new American administration which considers the economic crisis its top priority.

What is certain is that Iran's relationship with the United States will be heavily featured in the race to the Iranian presidency as it has always been. Perhaps former-president Mohamad Khatami's declaration that he will run for office will intensify the debate over American-Iranian relations. Khatami's direct message to Americans in the winter of 1997 through CNN, in which he stated that Iran does not have a problem with the American people but rather with American policies, has become the standard rhetoric of Iranian politicians today. This was evident in Iranian reactions to the Obama administrations agenda, where President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that Iran desires unconditional dialogue with the United States, a stance reiterated by chairman of the parliament, Ali Larijani, in the Munich Security Conference.¹ Delaying dialogue means disagreements will remain the subject of political debate, which more often than not damages honest intentions for constructive talks and keeps them hostage to verbal spoilers, thus leading to frustration of real attempts at dialogue.

The second option is to start talks before the Iranian elections and to hold them independently of the Iranian political and electoral scene. This option calls for a clear American message that the current administration is different from its predecessor, that it considers Iranian elections to be an internal issue, and that it is serious in pursuing talks regardless of the political affiliation of the next Iranian president. To start talks with Iran means that the new administration needs to respond to the congratulatory note sent by Ahmadinejad to Barack Obama. Such a decision requires a great deal of courage from president Obama and his team in light of prejudiced American views of Iran and president Ahmadinejad and the fact that many American politicians are still troubled by Ayatollah Khomeini's statement that Israel should be wiped off the map, which has been repeated lately by president Ahmadinejad. Replying to the congratulatory note may be a step, but it will merely serve to end the diplomatic freeze-off between the two countries.

¹ http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=188968, 9 February 2009

The decision to start talks before the Iranian elections will undoubtedly reflect on hot regional issues like the Lebanese elections in June 2009, especially since Hezbollah which is considered by Washington as an ally of Iran, has announced that it intends to control the new Lebanese government. The Iraqi referendum on the security agreement, set to take place in summer 2009, is another issue which will tip the scales in favor of beginning talks early should Washington see it necessary to win Iranian support for the referendum.

Initially, dialogue may start through experts representing the United States and Iran, possibly following the Israeli-Syrian example. However, it is important to stress that the two countries cannot overcome their fear of diplomatic negotiations without the aid of a third party or a broker, a fact which lends a great importance to this broker's role. The question here is who can take up this role.

The Potential Mediator

Talk about Russia acting as an intermediary between the United States and Iran seems unfounded, primarily due to Washington and Tehran's inability to see Moscow assuming the role. That said, for any country to qualify as a middleman it must have good relationships with both countries and be a disengaged party. Russia's tense affairs with the U.S. due to the Russo-Georgian war and the American rocket shield as well as its international image as a supporter of Iran's nuclear program disqualify it for the role.¹

European mediation does not seem likely partly because of a major crisis in European-Iranian relations, but also because there is a general European consensus that the solution to Iran's nuclear program lies in direct talks between Tehran and Washington. Years of European negotiations (EU3 France, UK, and Germany, which later developed into Group 5+1) with Iran proved unsuccessful in calming Iranian worries or in giving Iran any security guarantees to convince it to abandon uranium enrichment. Consequently, Iran considers the European outlook to be aligned with the United States, which may lead it to welcome a non-European third party.

The international community's perception of this potential mediator will have a significant impact on the talks between Washington and Tehran. In light of this fact, and of the current instability regionally and internationally, Turkey might just be an ideal candidate for the role. It maintains a good political reputation in Europe and in the Middle East, and it has good standings with both the United States and Iran. While it is true that the Turkish prime minister's reaction to the Israeli war in Gaza may have affected the country's image abroad (a sign of American discomfort can be discerned from John Mitchell's refraining from visiting Ankara during his first Middle Eastern tour, alternatively,

¹ In recent statements by William Burns, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Washington indicated a desire to improve its relationship with Russia. Such an improvement would not be the direct result of Russian logistic assistance to American and NATO troops in Afghanistan, but through collaborating to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions. Once that collaboration takes place, Washington would reconsider its rocket shield project. <http://www.interfax.com/17/471696/Interview.aspx>, 13 February 2009

it could be that the Americans do not wish to get involved in a diplomatic crisis generated by press statements and would rather get an official Turkish explanation for the incident,) Washington realizes that Turkey recognizes Israel and that the two enjoy strong diplomatic ties. It also recognizes that Turkey did not recall its ambassador to Israel after the Gaza fallout.

Since Turkey enjoys good relationships with both Washington and Tehran it understands the full scope of their disagreements. As a matter of fact, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has already offered to mediate between the two soon after President Barack Obama took office.¹ To Turkey's advantage, it has similar interests as Iran in combating militant Kurdish movements in northern Iraq -- a fact that Washington knows and appreciates. Turkey also has a deep understanding of Iran's regional situation and its relationship with Arab countries as well as non-state actors in the region like Hamas and Hezbollah, and it has a moderate attitude toward Iran's nuclear program. All of these factors, combined with Turkey's ability to manage U.S.-Iranian talks in full confidentiality and from media disturbances, recommend Turkey as an ideal candidate for mediation.

Conclusion

Rapid political developments in the region and an American desire for greater engagement in the Middle East region may be signs of American seriousness to pursue dialogue with Iran. However, that may be overshadowed by events in the region which will render this "seriousness" insufficient to guarantee the success of actual talks. That said, any Iranian-American dialogue seems to be set for failure unless it includes all pending issues. Indeed, "narrow" previous attempts at dialogue not only failed but complicated mutual relations further.

On another level, Turkey's possible role as a mediator may be comforting to Arab countries who seemingly place trust in the integrity of Turkish diplomacy. This is significant because Arab countries are always worried by the ulterior agendas of regional players such as Iran. More importantly, Turkey managed to benefit from the Israeli war on Gaza in the sense that it obtained a better understanding of anxieties in Arab politics, specifically when it comes to an Iranian-American agreement which may some feel may threaten Arab security and interests. In light of this realization, Turkey could relay its own impression of Hamas to Washington that the movement is not simply an extension of Iranian military activities. Turkey's role as a mediator is also supported by its membership in NATO and its involvement in military activities in Afghanistan, in addition to its recent offer to send troops to the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing in order to ensure the borders permanent opening.

The rise of the Israeli right will slow down, if not halt, the Israeli-Palestinian political process. On the other hand, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations will not necessarily freeze as there are no indications that Turkey will stop mediating the talks. The Israeli right is also escalating the verbal war with Iran and might translate it into military action, a possibility which U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair did not rule out.

¹ Tavernise, Sabrina: Turkish Leader Volunteers to Be U.S.-Iran Mediator, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12turkey.html>, 11 November 2008.

All of this might lead the new American administration to focus on its relationship with Iran in order to prove its commitment to “vigorous diplomacy” as an alternative to war. Within this context, if comprehensive talks do ensue between the U.S. and Iran, other pending issues in which they are both involved stand a better chance at being resolved.

To start American-Iranian talks before the Iranian elections, indeed within president Ahmadinejad’s term, will lend him an undeniable legitimacy given Ahmadinejad’s uncompromising political opinion of the country’s relationship with the U.S. In that case, should Ahmadinejad remain in office, the Iranian people would have voted for the continuation of diplomatic talks. In the other case, if ex-president Mohammad Khatemi, or any candidate from a similarly moderate political background is elected, there would be little room for criticism of talks with Washington, and any such criticism would be directly related to the gains achieved by talks.

Washington’s desire to avoid escalation in other regional issues like the Lebanese elections, and the Iraqi security referendum, are also factors that support an early start for talks with Tehran so as to guarantee Iranian support for American actions in these two areas. Moreover, American concentration on the war on terror in Afghanistan might be another factor prompting an early start.

There seems to be no real European presence in the impending talks between Tehran and Washington, especially since the last Group 5+1 meeting postponed discussion of the Iranian nuclear issue in hopes of a diplomatic breakthrough after president Obama’s call for unconditional talks with Tehran. Russia and China are likely to put their weight behind these talks in order to ensure their success and limit the economic damage they have had to suffer due to the UN Security Council’s sanctions on Iran.