

Looking Ahead to Direct Talks between the United States and Iran

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Direct talks between the United States and Iran over the nuclear issue are expected to start in the coming months. Incoming president Barack Obama has spoken openly about such a move several times, both before and following his election, saying he would be ready to meet directly with Iranian leaders during his first year in office if this promotes the interests of the United States. He added that dialogue could take place without preconditions, as preconditions are less important for the talks than careful preparation. In the talks themselves he would adopt a firm approach. Obama believes that a carefully crafted diplomatic effort will change world public opinion with regard to the US approach towards the Iranian regime and will enhance its abilities to deal with Iran if Tehran doesn't cease both its efforts to develop nuclear arms and its activity in Iraq.¹

In recent months various officials in the United States – particularly public figures and research analysts – have supported an attempt to begin direct talks with Iran on the nuclear issue. Thus, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen believes that talks with Iran are likely at some level in order to clarify the sides' positions.² The Saban Center at the Brookings Institute, in conjunction with the Council on Foreign Relations, published a detailed policy paper that supports dialogue with the Iranian regime, as all the other options have failed or involve high risk.³ Only a small number of key figures in the United States take a tougher approach than this. Senator McCain, for example,

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opposed negotiations with Iran from a position of weakness and without preconditions, and claimed that it is naive to assume that direct talks will lead to an agreement.⁴ Overall, however, the new president's willingness to hold talks with Iran is a response to a growing demand in the United States to pursue this approach.

Since 2006 Iranian leaders have called for direct talks with the United States without preconditions. Iranian figures – including President Ahmadinejad and Foreign Minister Mottaki – have reacted positively in recent months to the possibility of dialogue with the United States and to the idea of the United States having diplomatic representation in Tehran. In an unexpected move, Ahmadinejad was also keen to congratulate Obama on his election. At the same time, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that Iran will never suspend its nuclear activities and rejected the stick and carrot approach proposed by Obama. Other Iranian figures have moderated their expectations of the Obama administration and predict it will be no different from its predecessor.⁵

Past Experience

Various attempts, initiated by the United States or the Iranian regime, have been made since the Islamic Revolution to launch a dialogue between the two parties. In general, such attempts failed right from the outset or produced short term results.

In the first few months following the revolution, when a group of moderate figures joined the Iranian leadership, senior Iranian figures, including the prime minister and foreign and defense ministers, held talks with senior American officials and discussed improving relations between the two countries and renewing supplies of US arms to Iran. However, when the radical faction took over the Iranian regime and neutralized the moderate group – reflected in part by the November 1979 occupation of the US embassy in Tehran and the taking of hostages there – ties with the United States were severed. Economic sanctions by the US on Iran followed, and they have been strengthened gradually since 1984. On the Iranian side, the radical faction that led the regime discounted the possibility of softening its stance on the United States, and claimed that dialogue meant betraying the values of the regime. Even the end of the hostage crisis in 1980 and the limited supply of

arms to Iran with American involvement in the Irangate affair in the mid eighties did not improve relations between the two countries.

In the 1980s and 1990s a number of Iranian leaders – principally Presidents Rafsanjani and then Khatami – demonstrated willingness for dialogue and some degree of compromise with regard to ties with the US. This willingness was blocked by the radical leadership, primarily Khomeini and later Khamenei, who rejected any dialogue with the US administration, at least until it changed its position on Iran and stopped its support of Israel. In 1988, Khamenei said, “We don’t need talks or ties with the United States. The US administration is an enemy of the Islamic Republic.”

The Clinton administration periodically expressed public interest in talks and improved relations with Iran, and also took some measures of good will towards it. The most prominent of these was the address given by Secretary of State Albright on March 17, 2000, in which she expressed regret over past mistakes in US policy towards Iran. As a gesture of appeasement she announced the end of a ban on imports and exports of certain products to and from Iran and the United States. However, the administration reiterated its basic conditions for substantial improvement of ties with Iran and the lifting of American sanctions, namely, cessation of efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, disrupt the Arab-Israeli peace process, and abet terror. The Iranian response to the American steps was positive but muted, and explained that the American measures were not sufficient to bring about a fundamental improvement in relations between the two countries. In practice, there was no real change in US-Iran relations.

During the Bush administration additional efforts were made to start a dialogue between the two countries. For example, in late 2001, before and after the American military operation in Afghanistan, there were secret contacts between American and Iranian representatives in Geneva at the ambassadorial level with regard to rescue and salvaging activities ahead of the operation, stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan, and capturing the leaders of al-Qaeda. The talks were serious and spawned several points of agreement on Afghanistan, but

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this limited cooperation was stopped by the United States eighteen months later following a terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia carried out by members of al-Qaeda who, the US believed, sought refuge in Iran.

In 2003, against a backdrop of the American military operation in Iraq, Iran proposed – through the Swiss embassy in Tehran – holding talks with the US administration. According to information released later by a former member of the administration, the Iranian proposal included willingness to discuss all areas of disagreement between the two countries, including cooperation on the nuclear issue for peaceful purposes, recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests, coordinating efforts in Iraq, accepting the Saudi initiative for a solution to the Palestinian issue, and ending Iranian support for extremist Palestinian organizations. The affair is controversial: the administration believed then that the proposal was not serious, and the Swiss ambassador shared this assessment. Former administration personnel claimed that the offer was not serious, and the administration did not even attempt to examine and rather opposed contacts with the Iranians. In any case, there are no clear indications that the Iranians were willing to make real concessions on the key issues.

In May 2006 the administration changed its approach and proposed that the United States join European-led talks with Iran on the nuclear issue. The proposal also included important incentives, including a significant concession: ending the administration's opposition to development of a civilian nuclear program in Iran. However, the administration made its participation in talks contingent on Iran's suspending its uranium enrichment program. It refused to enter into comprehensive talks, and demanded instead that the talks focus on the nuclear issue. In practice, it was only in July 2008 that the American under secretary of state joined talks in Geneva for one meeting between the European countries and Iran, and did not hold separate talks with the Iranian representatives. Following its demand that Iran suspend uranium enrichment, the US withdrew from the talks, which ended without producing concrete results.

In March 2007 a one-day conference was held in Baghdad on an ambassadorial level that discussed stabilizing the situation in Iraq. The conference was attended by representatives from Iraq; from Iraq's neighbors – including Iran; from the five permanent members of the

UN Security Council, including the US; and from other countries. It was the first time in many years that American and Iranian officials met officially and in public. However, the sides did not hold bilateral talks and the conference did not produce tangible results.

The failure of previous attempts at negotiations indicates the inherent difficulties of creating any serious, in-depth, and ongoing dialogue between the United States and Iran. The initial difficulty is on the Iranian side. Since the revolution the United States has been perceived by the regime's dominant radical faction as the source of evil in the world. The intentional alienation from the United States is considered one of the important symbols of the revolution that must not be forfeited, despite its heavy price. To the regime, the distance is justified in part as atonement for past evils of American policy: the close link with the shah; CIA involvement in toppling popular Iranian prime minister Mossadegh in 1953; the (partial) support for Iraq in its war against Iran; and the attack on Iranian naval craft in the Gulf and the downing of an Iranian passenger plane at the end of the Iran-Iraq War.

Moreover, since the early 1990s the United States has been perceived by the Islamic regime as its most serious threat. The regime believes that the United States labors to its utmost to unsettle it, weaken it militarily and economically through sanctions, and isolate it politically. It is perturbed by the substantial US military presence in the Gulf and near Iran's borders. The US helped form a ring of pro-American regimes around Iran, and has invaded two of its neighbors – Afghanistan and Iraq – in order to bring down the regimes there once the United States believed they had crossed the red line. To Tehran, the declaration by the Bush administration that Iran is one of the three members of “the axis of evil” symbolizes the administration's hostile intentions. Above all, the US administration is seen as threatening a military operation against the nuclear facilities in Iran.

In the United States as well there is a sense of hostility and deep suspicion towards Iran. The hostage affair of 1979-80, including the burning of American flags and mass demonstrations with people shouting “death to the United States” left Americans with a deep sense of anger, helplessness, and

US-Iran dialogue brings with it potential friction and misunderstanding between the Obama administration and Israel.

humiliation towards the Islamic regime. Previous US administrations perceived Iran as a threat to major US interests: the position of the United States in the Gulf; its presence and activity in Iraq; its allies – principally Israel; the Israeli-Arab peace process; and stability in Lebanon. This threat perception was fueled by Iran's choice of modus operandi: extensive involvement in terror, in part against American targets in the Middle East (since 1984 the administration has called it "the country most involved in terror"); internal subversion against US allies; and strengthening of radical elements in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Most of all, the administration believes that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would substantially increase the threat it poses to American interests and disrupt stability in the Middle East.

Prospects for Dialogue with the Obama Administration

The Obama administration will face severe difficulties as it attempts to launch a dialogue with the Iranian regime. Past experience does not augur well for successful talks. Any future dialogue will start from a point of mutual suspicion and estrangement if not outright hatred. Moreover, due to the prolonged alienation and the absence of diplomatic ties between the sides and their respective mentalities, the parties do not understand one other sufficiently and may be unaware of the sensibilities of the other side. Due to these difficulties, and as there are elements in Iran that oppose any talks with the United States, it is quite possible that dialogue will not develop at all.

In addition to past resentment, any dialogue will face other difficulties. The respective objectives on the nuclear issue are different. The US administration will seek to use the talks both to persuade Iran to suspend its suspect nuclear activity and to block its efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. Iran on the other hand will seek to use the talks to gain time in order to further its nuclear program, gain American recognition of its status in the Gulf, and reduce the American threat without foregoing a nuclear option.

The gap between the sides on the nuclear issue is wide and thus far has prevented any understanding with Iran. Iran's tendency toward tactics of deceit and concealment will make it difficult to achieve a reliable arrangement. Most of the incentives the United States can offer Iran – mainly in economic and technological areas – were already

offered during negotiations with European governments over the last six years, to which the United States was a behind-the-scenes party. One open question is whether the United States has new bait to induce Iran to accept a deal.

It may be assumed that talks between the United States and Iran will be inclusive, and beyond the nuclear issue will address other issues relating to their relations: Iraq, combating terror, the Israeli-Arab peace process, the sides' interests in the Gulf region, Afghanistan, the sanctions placed on Iran, and economic and technological issues. Inclusive dialogue will offer an advantage in that it will allow the sides to try to reach an overall settlement of their relations. However, broad dialogue will also burden the negotiations because it is a lengthy process, thereby playing into the hands of the Iran as it seeks to gain time.

On the other hand, both sides seem to be more willing than in the past to examine the possibility of bridging differences through dialogue. Perhaps this very willingness and the possibility of examining respective positions through direct negotiations can help the talks achieve tangible results.

The Nuclear Issue

Even if the talks between the United States and Iran address other issues, the nuclear issue will be at the center. Thus far, direct dialogue on this matter has not been possible because the United States and European countries made actual negotiations contingent on Iran's prior suspension of uranium enrichment, while Iran rejected this and demanded negotiations without preconditions. If the Obama administration insists on this condition – backed by a Security Council resolution demanding that Iran suspend uranium enrichment – it is highly doubtful whether Iran would agree to talks with the United States. Consequently Obama has already said he would be willing to negotiate without preconditions, which ostensibly means he is willing to forego the uranium suspension condition. This concession will serve as an important tactical victory for Iran.

On the other hand, Obama talks about adopting a forceful approach to the talks, and it likely he will do so and seek to conduct the talks from a position of power. He did not go into details regarding his intentions

and presumably not only will he not rescind the sanctions on Iran, but he will aim to intensify them. He has already said that in order to increase pressure on Iran he will not take the military option off the table, and that he will never hesitate to use military force to defend American interests.⁶ It is also possible that Obama will limit the amount of time allotted for the talks, either from the start or after the fact, so as not to play into Iran's hands. Obama intends to coordinate his moves with other countries – mainly in Europe, but possibly also with Russia and China – in order to gain their support, whether the dialogue effort succeeds or fails.

Prospects for talks are assisted by the very fact of direct contact between the sides, which can generate a positive dynamic, and the possibility that the United States will offer Iran new rewards – predominantly in providing Iran with security guarantees, a commitment not to attack it and not to try to bring down its regime, and recognition of its interests in the Gulf area. Yet in view of the difficulties and obstacles entailed in these direct talks, the Obama administration probably does not entertain high expectations of achieving a resolution through direct dialogue. The combination of mutual suspicion and mistrust, gaps in positions, contrasting objectives, and different mentalities will make talks very difficult. Therefore, while the new administration will aim to maximize the use of dialogue, its main objective will be to try to show it has exhausted all diplomatic avenues to reach a settlement, in order to earn international legitimacy for taking tougher measures against Iran.

In practice, there are three possibilities of dialogue resolving the nuclear issue. The first is if Iran actually cedes its intention to develop nuclear weapons in return for rewards it would receive from the United States and security guarantees, and therefore agrees to suspend enrichment of uranium. At this stage, the likelihood of this happening does not seem high. Second, the United States might reverse its determination to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, based on the assumption that Iran cannot be stopped and that it is possible to live with a nuclear empowered Iran. The likelihood of this scenario is not high either. Third, the sides might reach a settlement that the United States considers the lesser of the evils and makes it possible to stop Iran, but in practice allows Iran leeway to continue advancing

its nuclear weapons capability. Such a settlement can include allowing Iran to enrich low quality uranium, in an agreed and limited quantity on its soil and under close international supervision. This would be a highly problematic arrangement since if Iran does not give up on its determination to obtain nuclear arms, it will exploit every loophole to maintain its objectives, even as part of a settlement. In this regard, international consent to Iran's enriching uranium on its own territory, even under the tightest international supervision, is in practice liable to free Iran from various limitations regarding the acquisition of technology and technological materials.

If talks with Iran fail, the Obama administration will have to devise an alternate way to address the issue. In this case, Obama will likely revert to the tough stance that has been a traditional feature of US policy towards Iran since the revolution, and particularly under the Bush administration. If he follows this course he will seek two additional means. First, he will want to muster wider international cooperation in increasing the pressure and sanctions on Iran, after also exhausting the direct dialogue channel with Iran. In this matter there will be special importance to harnessing Russia to the effort to stop Iran through more severe sanctions; this would entail a wide, more comprehensive perspective regarding the Obama administration's relations with Russia. The second measure is to explore fully the chance offered by Iran's increasing vulnerability to sanctions and economic pressure, both due to the drop in oil prices – assuming this continues – and as a result of Iran's worsening economic situation due to the global economic crisis.

Would the Obama administration endorse a military option if dialogue fails and does not produce a settlement on the nuclear issue? While Obama, like his predecessor, has stressed that the military option would be on the table, this course of action would hardly be pursued in the coming months, because the new administration needs time to examine the avenues of operation open to it and also because it will seek to exhaust the political approach and drum up international support for its steps should dialogue fail. Moreover, the current mood in the US, including the American defense establishment, does not support military action, but for the administration to order military action, it will also have to gain domestic support for such a measure.

Conclusion and Implications for Israel

The Obama administration is presumably about to initiate direct talks with Iran on the nuclear issue and as part of these talks incorporate other matters on the US and Iranian agendas. The administration will thereby try to accommodate the demand that has emerged in the United States and Europe to pursue this route on the nuclear issue and to muster wider international support for its steps on Iran. To this end, the administration will probably be willing to forego the precondition set by its predecessor and European governments – suspension of uranium enrichment before negotiations start.

The chances of this move succeeding seem slim, due to bad feelings from the past, suspicion and hostility between the sides, and the gap between their goals and positions. Nevertheless, the possibility of dialogue leading to a settlement on the nuclear issue exists, if at least one of the sides changes its position, if the reward the United States offers Iran is great enough so that the Iran prefers that to confrontation with the US, or if a settlement is reached that appears satisfactory to the United States, even if it does not meet all its demands. The growing willingness in the US and Europe to allow uranium enrichment in Iran, in a limited quantity and under strict supervision, enhances the possibility of attaining a settlement.

For Israel, US-Iran dialogue poses both risks and opportunities. The very move contains potential friction and misunderstanding between the Obama administration and Israel. If the administration foregoes the precondition of suspending uranium enrichment this will be a tactical victory for Iran and essentially condone its suspicious nuclear activity. More important, if a settlement is reached that allows Iran to enrich uranium on its own soil – even in limited quantities and with stricter supervision – Iran will gain a loophole to continue working to gain nuclear weapons, also as part of the settlement.

In terms of opportunities, it is possible that dialogue leading to a settlement, though at present unlikely, might also satisfy Israel. Alternatively, a failure will help the Obama administration garner broader international and domestic support for intensifying pressure on Iran, and possibly gain backing for a military move should the administration consider it.

Consequently, Israel should not oppose direct talks between the United States and Iran because of the opportunities this offers. It is also uncertain whether its opposition would alter the interest and intention of the Obama administration to launch such a dialogue, in which case Israeli opposition would spark unnecessary confrontation. For this reason, there is no point in Israel pressing for American insistence on the suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition of the talks, especially since Obama has already said he would forego this. Instead, Israel might insist on suspension of enrichment as a precondition for progressing with the talks and reaching a settlement, and on limiting the duration of talks with the Iranians. Furthermore, it is even more important that there be close coordination between Israel and the administration on the content of the talk. In particular, Israel must explain to the administration the danger involved in a settlement that would leave loopholes for Iran to continue developing nuclear weapons.

Notes

- 1 www.abcnews.go.com/print?id=4999088.
- 2 www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25515357/print/1/displaymode/1098.
- 3 www.brookings.edu/projects/saban-cfr/middle_east_strategy.aspx.
- 4 www.efluxmedia.com/action-print-n_id-25228.html.
- 5 For the internal debate in Iran on dialogue with the United States, see MEMRI, No. 477, 3.12.2008.
- 6 www.ynet.co.il, May 9, 2008.