

The Conundrum of Iran

Iran will be a major player on the world stage in the decades ahead, and its actions and behavior will have a major and enduring impact on near- and long-term U.S. interests on a wide variety of regional and global issues. With a population of over 70 million, xx percent of the world's proven oil reserves, a geostrategic location of tremendous (enviable?) significance, and a demonstrated potential to develop a nuclear-weapons program, the United States has no choice but to find a way to coexist—and to come to terms—with whatever government holds power in Tehran. At the same time, the Iranian Government also must come to terms with Washington, as Tehran's ability to advance its political and economic interests rests on a non-hostile relationship with the United States and the West.

There are numerous hurdles that stand in the way of improved U.S.-Iranian relations, but none is more daunting than the theocratic regime's nearly 30-year track record of engaging in transnational terrorism, both directly and indirectly, to advance its revolutionary agenda. Tehran's proclivity to promote its interests by playing the terrorist card undermines its standing as a responsible sovereign state and calls into question virtually all of its actions, even when pursuing legitimate political, economic, and strategic interests. While the use of terrorism(*footnote on definition) is reprehensible and of serious concern irrespective of the source, the wielding of the terrorism club by a nation state such as Iran is particularly alarming and insidious because of the ability of a government to use its instruments of national power to support, conceal, facilitate, and employ terrorist violence. Specifically, a sovereign government has the ready ability to provide all of the logistical requirements—e.g. the fabrication of official documentation, explosives, and weapons; the protected use of diplomatic facilities, staff, and pouches; and the provision of expertise, funding, and targeting intelligence—that can be used to great effect to plan and carry out successful terrorist attacks. Too often, and for too long, Iran has excelled at such activities.

The Historical Context and Record of Terrorism

The Iranian regime's current worldview and actions are shaped significantly by Iran's ancient history, its Persian and Shi'a Islamic essence, and developments of the past half century. While only slightly more than half its population is ethnic Persian, the wide expanse of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great (6th Century B.C.), which stretched far into southwest and central Asia and across to Egypt and north Africa, laid the basis for an Iranian mindset of far-reaching influence and engagement that remains to this day. The Persian identity was further molded more than a millennium later, when Shi'a Islam established deep roots in the region and made Persian leaders the protectors of the Shi'a faithful against Sunni Arab and other adversaries.

The World Wars of the 20th Century and their aftermath made Iran a pawn of global politics, as illustrated by the CIA-engineered overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, which allowed the pro-U.S. Shah to return to power and rule with an iron hand for the next 25 years. When he was ousted in 1979 and the Islamic Republic under

Ayatollah Khomeini was established, it was all but inevitable that the United States would draw the , the world's only remaining superpower, would be

Since the advent of the theocratic regime, the Iranian Government has sought to reclaim what it believes is its' rightful

Iran's record of direct and indirect involvement in terrorist attacks is long and bloody, with regime opponents and U.S. and Israeli interests bearing the brunt of attacks. Since 1979, the most notable examples include:

1983: Hizballah attacks against the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks that left xxx dead and more than xxx wounded.

Attacks against Israeli Embassy in Argentina.

Assassination of Israeli ambassador in London.

1996: Saudi Hizballah attack against U.S. forces housed at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed xxx and injured xxx. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the perpetrators of those attacks “reported their surveillance activities to Iranian officials and were supported and directed in those activities by Iranian officials.” (footnote)

The U.S.-Iranian Chessboard

An unfortunate hallmark of U.S.-Iranian relations since 2001 has been growing divide between Washington and Tehran, chronicled by bombastic rhetorical broadsides that have been hurled publicly by each side against the other. The tragedy of the al-Qa’ida launched terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland in September 2001 prompted the U.S. Administration to engage in a far-reaching campaign to eradicate the sources of terrorism, and Iran, understandably—but regrettably—was swept up in the emotionally charged rhetoric that emanated from Washington under the seemingly all-encompassing rubric of “The Global War on Terrorism.” The gratuitous labeling of Iran as part of a worldwide “axis of evil” by President Bush (date?) combined with strong U.S. criticisms of Iran’s nascent nuclear program and its meddling in Iraq led Tehran to the view that Washington had embarked on a course of confrontation in the region that would soon set a kinetic focus on Iran. Even Iran’s positive engagement in helping repair the post-Taliban political environment in Afghanistan was met with indifference by Washington. According to James Dobbins, the Bush Administration’s first U.S. envoy to Afghanistan, Iranian diplomats made important contributions to the success of U.N. sponsored negotiations that resulted in the inauguration of the Karzai Government in Kabul. But unlike the foreign ministers of other nations involved in those negotiations, Iran’s foreign minister did not receive a personal note of thanks from his U.S. counterpart, despite, according to Dobbins, the fact that he “may have been the most helpful.”

Recommendations

Whoever takes up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January 2009 will need to “hit the ground running” on Iran, especially since Tehran will react immediately to the new Administration’s policy statements that

1) Tone Down the Rhetoric: Iranian leaders of the ilk of President Ahmadinejad undoubtedly will continue to

2) Establish a Direct Dialogue with Tehran:

Iran’s importance to U.S. strategic interests and to overall stability in the region necessitates the establishment of a direct and senior-level dialogue between Washington and Tehran; the use of third parties, such as the Swiss, to convey messages between the two capitals in the absence of diplomatic relations is wholly insufficient. A direct U.S. dialogue with Tehran, moreover, should not have a narrow focus, as the array of issues of most concern about Iran—engagement in terrorism and support to subnational “extremist” groups as well as proliferation activities and regional ambitions—are inextricably intertwined. A comprehensive framework for discussing these issues is required.

Over the past several decades, experience has shown that seemingly intractable foreign policy challenges for the United States have been best handled by the appointment of a Presidential envoy who has the experience, gravitas, and the authority to deal effectively not only with non-U.S. interlocutors but also with U.S. officials who have the potential to stand in the way of progress. The appointment of a U.S. Presidential envoy to Iran is long overdue. The argument that such an appointment would be premature as long as Iran is on the Department of State’s list of state sponsors of terrorism is without merit and foundation; the United States has diplomatic relations with Syria, also on the list, and has appointed Presidential envoys to North Korea and Sudan.

An ideal candidate for Presidential envoy to Iran is former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who retains wide notoriety and respect throughout the region. Secretary Powell has an in-depth understanding of the politics and history of the region as well as of the equities of the

Other potential candidates include former Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and former National Security Advisors Tony Lake and Brent Scowcroft.

3) Seek Realistic, Measureable Steps:

4) Hold Out Meaningful Carrots, as Well as Sticks: