

Playing Hard To Get: Iran's Relations With The US

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On February 20, Iran will hold its national parliamentary elections with or without the Liberal or Reformist candidates' participation. The hardliners or conservatives are ready to "play hardball" once more with their major domestic opposition by rigging the next elections, thereby ensuring their own longevity and the dominance of their "vision of good Islamic rule" as opposed to the liberal "society of just rule." Some suggest that the liberals will soon turn to winning the hearts and minds of the general population by actions *outside the system*, having lost the present power struggle from *within the system*.

While Iranians "duke it out" both at the ballot boxes and in its urban streets, the Islamic Republic [IR] continues to play a "hard to get" act with the US power brokers, that is, with US global corporate and military interests. It will come as no surprise to observers of Iran that its domestic politics dictates its regional and even global relations. In looking back to the past fifty years, Iranian elites' relations with the US were either slavish or even sycophantic in serving US global economic and military interests, or virulent and even revolutionary in opposition to all that the US was or stood for. The present IR's hardliners, on the other hand, have shown little inclination to either serve or to oppose the US, its corporate cornucopia, or its military sledgehammer. Instead, the present IR has been "playing hard to get" with the US in terms of long-term cooperation; instead, the IR plays out a short-term policy of flirtations, and shifting interests.

The IR pretends to be confrontational towards the "Great Satan" as part of its "revolutionary" rationale to the Iranian "street," arguing that it more than Ayatollah Mohammed Khatami and the Reformists carries out Iran's true interests. In fact, the hardliners use the *fiction* of the "Great Satan" to ensure its continued *real* heavy-handed domination over the reformists, religious wishes, or liberal, secular left aspirations, or over minority and women's demands for greater participation and change in post-1979 revolutionary Iran. The Iranian hardliners' opposition to US regional and global domination is also a *fictional* confrontation of US power while maintaining a *real* war against both its domestic and overseas Iranian and non-Iranian enemies—be they leftists, liberals, or the Mojahedin—and from the overseas Iranian secular communities to Israel, Egypt, and the oil-rich Persian Gulf Arab states.

When you think about it, Iran's hardliner-dominated Islamic Republic is a sight "for sore eyes" to many of the US neo-conservative [neo-con] and Christian religious right elite economic and military interests. The neo-con and Christian right, share the Islamic hardliners' distrust of "open elections" and "participatory democracy." They also share the Iranian hardliners' lust for economic and political power to the exclusion of the Liberal, Secular, or Leftist portions of their population. Finally, they share the desire for lasting wealth and privilege to the exclusion of either majority or minority opponents. Why would not the neo-con and US Christian right want to see the continuation of Iran's hardliners?

Rather than seeing the Iranian hardliners as opponents, the present US elite see them as allies who more often than not are "playing hard to get" rather than hard to dominate or to repress. For the US elite Neo-cons and Christian right, Iran's hardliners are not *actually* the enemy or "axis of evil." Rather, US economic and military elites see common interests and aspirations among themselves and Iran's conservative and right-wing elites, such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Hasan Rouhani, or Ayatollah Ahmad Shamkhani—that is, commonality in private

property, private markets, and short-term loans; in foreign direct investments; in curtailed liberalization of women's and the political left's role in society; and in controlling secularization of society.

The Iranian hardliners, thus, know that any actions by the US economic and military interests regarding Iraq, the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia are dreams come true in terms of "pay back" for grievances against a range of opponents, such as Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist leadership, the corrupt and "overly rich" Arab oil states in the Gulf, and the increasingly vulnerable House of Saudi Arabia. According to David Horowitz's conservative *FrontPage Magazine*, the US does have common cause with opponents of Iran's Guardian Council and Ayatollah Khamenei in terms of the hardliners *excessively* brutal rule and highly inflammatory rhetoric against US global economic and military interests. Similar to the former US ambassador to the United Nations, Dr. Jeanne Fitzpatrick who argued for closer US ties with Central American "moderately authoritarian" regimes, so too the Bush administration finds useful common cause with the Middle East's "moderately authoritarian" regimes, such as Turkey's Justice and Development Party, or Israel's Likud Party, or Egypt's National Democratic Party. Iran's hardliners may find themselves off the hated "axis of evil" list if they were only "less repressive," if they were more cooperative with the US in tracking down global terror organizations, if they were more willing to refrain from nuclear fission programs, and if they further US corporate interests in the region. US Neo-cons and the Christian right are waiting for Iran's hardliners to put aside the domestic policies of excessive violations of human rights, and their hard-to-get policies of the present, and to begin cooperative policies of the future. Whether Iran also liberalizes its present draconian measures towards the media, students, and academic freedom of expression, or *actually* improves human and civil rights for women, children and minorities, is not *really* important for the Bush Administration's relations with Iran.

Iraq

Iraq is obviously the archenemy in terms of Iran's *real foreign policy*. Settling accounts with the defunct war-mongering Iraqi Ba'athists has been a goal of Iran's policies for two decades. What better condition than have the U.S. bring down the House of Saddam Hussein, and then set up a post-Ba'athist/neo-imperial security, military and public service systems lingering as long as possible in the region with the huge US military material in place. In addition, the Iraqi Kurdish-US alliance ensures an absence of those past pesky *pesh merga* incursions into Iranian Kurdistan since the KDP/PUK coalition will have its hands full in treading political waters wedged among Turkey, Syria, and Baghdad. Finally, the US did Iran an enormous favor in disbanding the PMOI and confiscating their conventional weapons, organization and military command, thereby removing the PMOI's irritating political agitation, and the Islamic Republic's only armed Iranian opposition.

Persian Gulf States

The Persian Gulf States have generally maintained "correct political relations" with Iran over the past two decades with a few exceptions. The March 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq by the US combined forces began a continued wave of US military arrangements with a number of the Persian Gulf States. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain Islands, and, in indirect ways, Oman remain closely supportive of the US imperial presence in the region, including the occupation of Iraq less for the immediate military actions from March 2003 to the present than for the long haul of US military, political, and economic presence in the

Persian Gulf. More than ever before, the Persian Gulf States and Qatar in particular find themselves not only in the arms of the US, but also in its very bosom. A “quiescent” Iran and a occupied Iraq work well with the shaykhdoms, as the US protective umbrella offers far greater guarantees for their political and economic futures than any Persian Gulf Cooperation Council or a viable Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had in the past.

Saudi Arabia

For Iran, moreover, the US protective umbrella in the Persian Gulf means fewer worries about attacks on its own oil docks and refinery facilities, or against the narrow and highly susceptible shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf. Speculation abounds regarding the future of the Saudi Kingdom awash with its own problems of Wahhabi insurgencies, high employment among its young, a disenfranchised and alienated foreign labor force, greater efforts on OPEC’s part to maintain or even lower petroleum prices, and rising costs in maintaining the “state welfare system.” As Iran’s nemesis with the Islamic World Conference and within the region, Saudi Arabia will need US protection more and more in the teeth of Wahhabi opposition. Clearly confident in its own Islamic state, the present hardliner government in Tehran is more than pleased that the US will need to contain the Saudi post-9/11 fallout while Iran curries favor with the US as a “stable regime.”

The Future

There are four scenarios in which Iran’s relations with the US may evolve over the next five years:

1. Iran’s present hardliners will improve relations with the US under a re-elected Bush administration in opposition to a Democratic-dominated Congress and a generally liberal State Department. It is in the interests of the US global economic and military interests represented in Washington by the International Monetary Fund [IMF], the World Bank, and the Import/Export Bank on the one hand, and by the Pentagon on the other. In return for near-perfect compliance in its nuclear energy technology programs, close cooperation in seeking out Taliban or al-Qaeda operatives, and general cooperation in exploring and exporting Caspian hydrocarbons, the US boycott of Iran will be lifted, Iran will be removed from the terrorist list, and US corporate financial and industrial interests will rise in Iran, both as private investors and co-production partners. Iran will be instrumental in maintaining the security of Iraq’s eastern borders and Afghanistan’s western borders, while assisting in maintaining security in the Persian Gulf, Caspian and Caucasus regions. Iran will increase its economic and military programs with Turkey, particularly in regard to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy, or KADEK (the former PKK) party, and its relations with Iran’s Kurdish population. Iran’s own internal security affairs will increase as the reformists challenge the hardliners on every level of society and in every region of the country on all domestic and foreign-policy issues. The US will offer assistance in helping the hardliners meet such potentially dangerous contingencies.
2. Iran’s present hardliners will find increased difficulties in maintaining a regional presence with the election of a Democratic president and a Democratic-dominated Congress. The US will scale back its forces both in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf in coordination with the United Nations including German, French, and Russian armed forces. The boycott of Iranian goods and services will remain, and Iran will face tougher questions and charges

- of civil and human rights violations including free and open elections across the country, allowing for an emergence of reformist candidates, greater participation by women, minorities, and the liberal-left coalitions. The opening up of Iran in political terms will lead to gradual involvement of Iran in regional economic, social, military, and political alliances, not only with regional governments but also with regional coalitions with particular emphasis on federal government formations in the Fertile Crescent, a rapid conclusion to the "Palestine Question," and a mutual defense pact with regional allies with or without UN assistance. Iran will play a critical role in the creation of a Middle East "common market," the sharing of regional oil revenues including the Caspian oilfield revenues, and shared military security pacts. The reformists will dominate all Iran's policy-making decisions through the Majlis and referendum elections/decisions, eventually eliminating the role of the Council of Guardians and the role of the Velayat-e Faqeh.
3. Iran's hardliners will survive both the re-election of President Bush and his Administration, and/or the election of a Democratic president; the election of either a Republican-dominated or Democratic-dominated Congress will be unimportant. Rumors of popular militant resistance to the hardliners' security forces appear to be the beginnings of yet another popular revolutionary movement within strategic Iran. The US will not wait-and-see this time around, but will be preemptive as relations worsen to the point that the US, along with the UN armed forces will seek out the assistance of dissident military and paramilitary forces such as the Kurdish *pesh merga*, the Iranian Mojahedin, Persian Gulf-based militants, and intelligence-organized opposition forces to overthrow the hardliners in Tehran and in Iran's principal cities, and towns replacing them with handpicked Iranian collaborators from a range of political groups. The US/UN forces will occupy Tehran, all major border towns and villages, and the Iranian oilfields, controlling all pipelines, refineries and export centers, and seaports, while a search for hardliners, Taliban, and al-Qaeda forces is carried out over an extended period. All Iranian military and security forces will be disbanded, and trade and financial agreements suspended. The combined US/UN command will coordinate Iran's economy, public services, and political activities for an extended period.

In the opinion of this writer, Iran is more likely to face the first scenario over the next five years. The probability of the second scenario is high, given the increasingly angry US public with the Bush Administration's domestic, and foreign policies, in particular the Iraq War, the PATRIOT Act, and Homeland Security measures including the widespread and as yet undocumented violations of human and civil rights of non-European Americans before, during and since the events of September 11, 2001 in and outside the territories of the US. The general reluctance by many Iranians to engage once more in a "revolutionary" struggle also make the second scenario less likely. The probability of the third scenario is very unlikely. One, of course, wishes that American and Iranian dissatisfactions with their governments' personnel and policies will result in a more satisfactory quality of life, political and economic prosperity, and social stability than what exists in February 2004 in either country. Given the twenty years of preparations and background of the present Bush Administration beginning with the Reagan era, and the directions of the global economic and military interests in the industrial capitalist nations, the likelihood of either of the second or third scenarios is very limited. In all probability, the present hardliner administration of the Islamic Republic will continue in place for the next foreseeable five years. Knowing that all change does

indeed occur in human history, and that it is actually a question of “when” and not “if” profound political and economic changes may occur both within the US and within Iran, people with aspirations for a better world, both in Iran and in the US, may indeed not have to wait too long.