

## TAMING THE LION - APPROACHES TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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With the inauguration of the new Clinton administration and the replacement of Warren Christopher as Secretary of State, some commentators, including many in Iran, anticipate an opportunity to reassess US relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Given the reflective mood among former members of the US political elite, as well as a flurry of articles and new books providing the American public with a new perspective on modern Iranian history, along with the announcement that two senior Washington think-tanks are to study US policy towards Iran, there is among some people, an air of optimism. Given that only a few months ago, the US Congress was seriously considering a retaliatory military strike against Iranian targets following the alleged evidence of Iranian participation in the Dharam bombing in Saudi Arabia, this view may be considered *too* optimistic. Madeleine Albright, Christopher's replacement as Secretary of State, is in reality probably the one person who could have been guaranteed to continue her predecessor's intransigent policy towards Iran, and the Clinton Administration continues to be staffed by people ill-disposed to see Iran in a different light. Nevertheless, some measure of reflection has been initiated, and this is as opportune a time as any to contribute to the discussion.

It can be argued that US foreign policy is handicapped by too severe a subservience to short term political expediency. In many ways, especially when considering policy formulation towards Iran, it tends to be reactive, tactical, in that decision makers can see no further than the next election, and unusually constrained by a lack of historical and cultural contextuality. Simply put, for many US policy makers, the history of US-Iran relations begins either with the fateful seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, or with the embarrassing debacle of the Iran-Contra Affair. Both these incidents are highly emotive and involve the humiliation of the United States. This tendency to think tactically is a product of the nature of the organisation of the US State in which decision making lies largely with political appointees, who frequently ignore the advice of non-political civil servants. It should come

as no surprise that more moderate, and strategic assessments emanate from the State Department, academic establishments and from retired members of the political establishment no longer vulnerable to electoral politics.

It follows from the above, that the first stage in any progression from the current persistent fluctuations in policy, must be to think *strategically*. If anything positive can be drawn from the recent shift in US attitudes, at least outside government circles, it must be this recognition that the long term picture must be assessed. It can be argued that this shift was prompted by the very real fear that the tendency to think reactively and tactically was leading the United States into a self-fulfilling prophecy of military confrontation, with consequences for the region which frightened many. For those in any doubt as to the reality of this deterministic line of thought, one need look no further than the various hysterical comments by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and far more seriously, the intellectual justification conveniently provided by Huntington in his article entitled *Clash of Civilisations*.

There are three broad strategies which can be pursued: the strategy of confrontation; the strategy of inertia; and the strategy of rehabilitation. The first, it is argued is not an effective nor realistic strategy, since its consequences are unclear and may lead to more rather than less instability in the region, which contradicts overall US strategy. It relies heavily on tactical and reactive perceptions, but should be dismissed as a strategic objective. It may prolong and exacerbate the situation but as Vietnam proved, it cannot be considered a viable policy by itself and would not provide a solution. The second strategy is essentially one of inactivity and maintenance of the status quo, which may satisfy members of the military-industrial-ideological complex on both sides, but being essentially reactive, it encourages an abdication of responsibility and loss of control over policy. In a dynamic international system, it is far better to be pro-active, and as far as the United States is concerned, seek the initiative as far as foreign policy objectives are concerned. The third strategy, provides the best long term solution for stability, and it must involve a policy of engagement. As the chief determinant and strategic objective, it may of course use the other two strategies as tactical manoeuvres, but the means should not be confused by the end, which must be rehabilitation.

The reasons for some sort of rehabilitation are persuasive and need not be repeated in depth here. Suffice it to say, that Iran is politically, culturally and economically, the focal point for the region, lying astride the two huge energy basins of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, with access to the markets in Central Asia and Transcaucasia. Its political system is, albeit erratically, developing along broadly democratic lines, its borders are essentially stable, and it has a vested interest in regional stability. It is in possession of a vast, if young, population, and culturally and politically, it exerts an influence both, through its Persian and Islamic inheritances, far beyond its own borders. Above all, Iran has had its revolution, and tempered by a prolonged war, Iranian society is beginning to settle. In short, Iran is too important a country to ignore, and in the long term, as the Europeans and Japanese contend, must be rehabilitated into the international system. Certainly, it would transform US policy in the region, and considerably expand and ease available options.

This process of rehabilitation, for it will be a gradual and possibly protracted one must involve a variety of different approaches, fundamental to which must be the reconstruction

of mutual trust, and respect between Iran and the United States. Essential to this, must be the de-demonisation of Iran in the US public perception and an acceptance that the Iranians have a viable point of view. One exaggerated example of this is the Rushdie Affair, which owing to its extreme nature, is not a good vehicle for confidence building, but it does highlight the Iranian perception that their sensitivities and views are constantly dismissed. It would be far more constructive to begin by looking at other issues, including a reassessment of US involvement in Iran from 1953 onwards and an understanding, that however misplaced, many Iranians consider the US to be at the root of many current problems. This must also be contextualised within Iranian perceptions of foreign interference in their affairs from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. More important perhaps must be a recognition of US involvement in supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (a war which many people add as a footnote to the subsequent Persian Gulf War), especially the events surrounding the USS Stark (which despite having been hit by an Iraqi fighter was blamed on Iran) and the tragic shooting down of the Iranian airbus by the USS Vincennes. There can be no doubt that Iran has to also acknowledge its own errors, but her actions have largely been reactions, sometimes irrational, to the threat it perceives from the world's foremost power. This should not absolve Iran of responsibility for its behaviour but it is a reassessment of the relative distribution of responsibility.

It may be argued that this step has already begun in the US and that we are now waiting for the political ramifications - in Europe and Japan of course, the next stage, that of critical dialogue has already been initiated. It is important when taking this step to understand what is meant by the phrase - though obvious to most, it is often forgotten that a dialogue is a two way exchange of ideas, and cannot simply be the West lecturing Iran on morals. There is a simple question of pride here, but historians may find that Iranians do have a moral case to argue. At the same time, this dialogue must be *critical*, focusing on issues of importance to both sides. The criticism, which must be rigorous, must however also be credible, and solutions must be attainable. It is unacceptable to charge Iran with transgressions, that other allied powers are not scrutinised for. Human rights, even by Islamic standards, are a valid target for criticism as are expressions of extremism. But criticisms which are in themselves both extreme and vague, if occasionally patronising (i.e., bad behaviour) serve no useful purpose. Above all one must be specific rather than general, as well as consistent. The recent US cautious welcome of the Taleban in Afghanistan was the worst possible signal to send, since it served notice that radical Islam was not a problem.

This first stage is both the most difficult and the most rewarding in the long run, and the key to stable relations. It is ably assisted by:

**1. Encouragement of humanitarian missions** - non-political missions which exchange or assist in the development of medical or educational programmes, and as has been occurring, with refugees, is an effective tool for diluting mutual paranoia. There is for example, an excellent opportunity in Iran's need for military doctors with experience in treating shell-shock victims.

**2. Economic expansion** - nothing dilutes the rhetoric of the Great Satan more than to be faced with attractive goods from the US. Prior to the US sanctions in May 1995, US goods were steadily re-entering the Iranian market, and many goods still reach Iran through Dubai.

**3. Selective political co-operation** - this can be in the form of non-governmental organisations. The Cairo population conference is a good example of an arena where Iranian and US delegates, met, discussed, and found they had much in common. But there are also specific political issues where Iran and the US can co-operate, as in many cases they already have done, such as Bosnia, maintaining the flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and many other regional security issues.

A gradual and incremental process of rehabilitation should eventually lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations firmly founded on mutual respect and trust, which should be able to withstand the various misunderstandings that are bound to occur when two cultures interact. No one is suggesting that the process is easy, nor indeed smooth, and any initiative requires courage, but fortune after all favours the brave!