



The Need for Removing the Demons from American and Iranian Political Discourses

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Supporters of removing tensions from the Iranian foreign policy consider it a goal that is directly linked with Iran's national and security interests. In their view, a reinterpretation of the concept of "national security," and its adaptation to the realities of the present world, is an urgent necessity.

Recalling the hostage crisis, the majority of Iranians are critical of the violations of international norms that occurred in the early days of the revolution in 1979. The people of the United States, too, are unhappy with their government's interference in the internal affairs of Iran. Both of these reactions have rational foundations rooted in the historical experiences.

Both nations have paid very dearly for these experiences. Their similar thinking in opposition to their respective governments' errors constitutes a favorable ground for removing tensions from US-Iran relations and encouraging both governments to sit at the negotiation table.

The term "Satan" entered into Iran's foreign-policy culture for the first time in 1979. The revolutionaries called the United States the "Great Satan." After almost two decades, the United States acted similarly, placing Iran within the "Axis of Evil" and intensified its political attacks against Tehran. Thus, the term "Evil" entered into the US diplomatic discourse and foreign policy.

Today, Iran, although still entangled in some degree of adventurism domestically, has inevitably distanced itself from its past revolutionary fervor and foreign policy adventurism. Likewise, the US is gradually getting farther away from the September 11 incident, with Katrina having reduced its aggressive energy.

Meanwhile, in an unprecedented unison, Western universities are putting their academic freedoms at the service of support for moderate Moslems. Maybe the seed sown through this, though purely academic at the moment, will bear, in the long term, the fruits of democracy, peace and improvements in the lives of over one billion Moslems around the world.

Thus, it is possible to remove the demons from the political discourses of both countries. Although the scene is still empty, on both sides, of moderate leaders who can act independently of the adventurers, it is still possible to change the foreign policy discourses. Both nations are expressing their readiness in every possible language.

The people of Iran, although deprived of freedom of expression, are expressing their desires; and the people of the United State use their freedom of expression to remove the demons from their country's foreign policy discourse. It is unfortunate that both governments are ignoring these national demands.



What is clear is that this is bound to happen. However, the course of events gives rise to the concern that the Iranian people might pay a high price for it. They are intolerant and tired of wars and sanctions. However, despite developments that have brought the EU closer to the US over Iran's nuclear energy matter, at no time have the two governments' official interpretations of the concepts of national interests and national security been so close to each other.

More than ever in recent history, the US government understands and needs the regional capacities of the Shi'a government of Iran to control and reduce tensions in a vast area along the Iran-Afghanistan border. Meanwhile, the Iranian government is struggling with a multitude of social, cultural, political and economic problems whose solutions require the lifting of American sanctions.

Tehran is well aware that without regaining some degree of popular support, especially in the area of people's living standard, its very existence is in danger. Americans are equally unhappy with the growing poverty and tax burden in the US economy. The Bush administration needs stability in its foreign policy to address domestic issues.

The degree of popular dissatisfaction that similarly exists in both countries should convince both governments to change their diplomatic language for the sake of peace. A blockade of Iran or a US-Iran war would intensify the two nations' increasing dissatisfaction with their respective governments and would threaten both countries' national security and interests.

According to reports, Iran's former nuclear negotiation team had tried hard to widen the gap between the EU and the US in favor of Iran. The new team, however, has acted in a manner that has in fact narrowed the gap between the two main international powers, bringing them to a unified policy toward Iran. Tehran is now left with no choice but to ask for direct negotiations with the US on the nuclear issue.

Safeguarding and strengthening Iran's national security depends on the wellbeing and happiness of the Iranian people, and on improving the country's prestige at the international level. It also depends on the elimination of destitution for people in the outlying regions (who for many centuries have been protecting Iran's territorial integrity), on fighting political and economic corruption, and on respecting the principles and norms of human rights.

The economic sanctions have hurt the people of Iran significantly while the governments have used them to their advantage. Using US sanctions as a cover, the regime's cronies have formed all sorts of informal organizations that now monopolize the country's imports and exports, its ports, and its customs, and have made windfall fortunes. We have reached a point where any serious crack down on these rogue organizations and their affiliates in the government can easily threaten the existence of the system as a whole.

Thus, in Iran we have been dealing with forces who owe their supremacy to US sanctions and the suffering of the Iranian people. Nothing but a shell is left of the judiciary. These monopolistic and corrupt forces have established control everywhere, up to the highest levels of the power pyramid. Even the highest authorities in the government don't dare to challenge these forces or their interests.



The people of Iran know that the Islamic regime has shut down all US facilities in the country for the past 26 years, and that has not helped their living standard, which has fallen significantly relative to the pre-revolutionary time. They have no security and been hurt socially; they have lost their civil and political liberties, and women have been forced to wear veils; the code enforcement courts are constantly harassing people for violating the Islamic codes, and defense attorneys are denied professional immunity; and there is no sign of economic security while drugs are rampant.

All these have happened in the absence of the US from Iran. Thus, neither the people nor anyone else can blame the US for these conditions, especially at a time when the Iranian Government has greatly benefited from the rising oil prices. Every element of this ugly scene is a result of suppression of the press, mismanagement, and predominance of a system of patronage based on family and clan interests rather than national interests. As a result, for the people of Iran, the villain is not the US; rather, they are forces internal to the country

The undesirable human rights conditions during the past quarter of a century have been a result of the country's legal structure, on the one hand, and the abuses committed by rogue organizations and individuals, on the other. Therefore, even if we can prove that the US has been responsible for violations of human rights in Iran prior to the revolution, one cannot make such a claim for the period of the past twenty-six years.

Thus, we cannot blame the Iranian people for thinking differently. No longer is their hopes tied to the sermons and official speeches of the government authorities; nor are they tied to the "Death to America" slogan. Rather, the Iran-Iraq war and the US sanctions, among other events, have shaped their experience and hopes. Meanwhile, they have lost their hopes in the capabilities of the opposition forces, both inside the country and abroad, to effect broad political changes.

At the same time, they are witnessing the situation in Iraq and the people's daily living conditions there, which they hate. Thus, their occasional comments about the hope for foreign intervention are nothing but a sign of desperation for getting out of their present situation. Foreign intervention is not a genuine desire for them; and they would act differently with the first sound of explosion aimed at liberating them.

More nationalist-minded Iranians often criticize defenders of human rights in Iran for appealing to international bodies in the hope of bringing about changes in the country. Where else could they go when even the defense attorneys are imprisoned? No doubt, the normalization of US-Iran relations will take away an important weapon from the hands of the violators of human rights in Iran. However, one must ask: which weapon?

For many years, the Islamic officials have accused any voice of reason of cooperating with the US. The accusers have always said that the US is an enemy of Iran and that any contact with any of its official bodies constitutes an act of espionage and is against the country's national and international security. This excuse has been used to silence many pro-reform voices, and to close down many cultural, political and journalistic institutions. Even obtaining visas from the US has been used for leveling such accusations.



It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the pro-establishment newspapers, which have been the main venue for these accusations, have currently gotten more active. And I wouldn't blame them, because they would lose their main weapon should an atmosphere of negotiations develop between Iran and the US. They could no longer commit the acts which they have been committing since the time of the Provisional Government in 1979; they could no longer slander the country's intellectual elite and turn the judiciary against them.

Various security and judicial agencies in Iran have realized, especially since the time of the hostage crisis, that repeating such slogans as “Death to America” and the like increases their repressive power and creates better opportunities for them to eliminate their opposition. As a result, they have decided to put this slogan on an artificial life support in order to prolong its already expired life.

As long as a strong political force, with support from the people, has not taken away the monopoly control of the “Death to America” forces over the issue of national security, and as long as this concept is not redefined in accordance with the present realities in Iran and the world, there can be no hope for change. Hence the inability of the Iranian negotiation team to achieve anything other than raising the banner of an unequal war.

Under the present conditions, the people of Iran have no patience for war and blockade. They are disappointed to the point that whomever the Islamic leaders declare as an enemy, they consider as a friend; and whomever the leaders declare as a friend, they consider as an enemy. They also define national security as a concept based on territorial integrity, social wellbeing, economic security, liberties, democracy, human dignity, justice and human rights.

If we apply these criteria, we will have no choice but to decide that, in the Iranian people's eyes, lack of security — both domestic and international — has been a direct result of mismanagement by the leaders of the country. At least during the past twenty six years no other factor can be said to have been responsible. It was they who wasted all the opportunities.

While the Iranians and Americans share similar dissatisfactions, the latter are fortunate to enjoy freedom to speak out and protest against war, torture, and violations of human rights without the fear of retaliation. As for the Iranians, they have to whisper about their problems and still go to jail or into exile for doing so. On top of it all, institutions like the Guardians Council have made it virtually impossible for the alternative thinkers and the political opposition to effect meaningful circulation of political power.

This article was originally written in Farsi and translated by the Council's staff, upon the request of Mehrangiz Kar, for publication in the *AIC Update*. The author is a prominent Iranian lawyer and human rights activist. Kar is currently a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University.