

SPEAKING WITH IRAN

Truth is stranger than fiction, it is said, because fiction must stick to probabilities, but truth need not.

And so it came to pass that a superannuated, New York-based, Jewish real estate man emerged as a spokesman for American values on Iranian national television.

What began as an intellectual lark soon became deadly serious as I found myself aware of the profound misconceptions that each society had of the other.

Knowing and understanding the other's positions (and negotiating strengths and weaknesses), seeking areas of mutual interest, adjudicating differences when possible and negotiating compromises—are desirable; and meaningful communication—which has been totally lacking—is an important first step.

What can be achieved by a single individual with a marginal role cannot be determined; but the prospect was challenging and I plunged in.

For over two years I participated by telephone from New York in English language current events discussions which are broadcast live from Tehran in late evening to the Iranian public and by satellite to an audience abroad.

Subjects range from breaking political events in Iraq and Iran, activities of the United Nations and of the Arab League, censorship, the role of women in the Islamic world, events in Israel and in Saudi Arabia, and, of course, Iran's nuclear development program.

The program's moderator is neutral, my fellow participants—usually leading Iranian academics and government officials or anti-U.S.

policy Americans and foreigners (Noam Chomsky and the Vice President of Iran were on a recent program)—defend Iranian government positions; and I defend the U.S. against charges of hypocrisy, insensitivity, brutality and evil.

What has emerged from these discussions, from my meetings with Iranian academics, journalists and government officials, and from my reading, is a picture of Iran today that differs from conventional wisdom.

First, far from being a monolith, Iranian society is deeply fractured. Although the political leadership refers to the U.S. as “the great Satan,” the Iranian public, especially the young born since the clerical take-over in 1979, until recently admired and respected the U.S. to a degree unparalleled in the Islamic world. The majority of the Iranian public (some estimates run as high as 80% to 90%) is opposed to mullah domination of Iran’s political and economic life, a domination which has led to economic stagnation and a degree of corruption staggering even by comparison with the Shah’s regime. Common sense dictates that conveying a vision of a better life for the Iranian people is a more effective means of increasing the gap between the government and the public than threatening military action.

Some fraction of the top leadership— size unknown but fanatic in intensity—may actually seek a nuclear Armageddon, to be followed by the presumed arrival of the 12th Imam and universal peace; another fraction, devout but rational, espouses worldwide expansion of Islam but without war; and a third fraction, pragmatists, may seek only Iran’s well-being. The strength of their respective influence on the Supreme Leader—who calls all the shots—varies from time to time.

The revolutionary generation of fervent Islamists currently in control is aging, however; and the nature of Iranian leadership five years hence is unknowable.

Second, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—unexpectedly elected President in a process that stringently limits and controls the selection of candidates— was in no sense a conventional popular choice in the

Western sense; he is widely feared as a “loose cannon” even by Iran’s top leadership.

His aggressive position on nuclear development in the face of what is seen as Western bullying has touched a responsive chord of national pride even among the young, who despise him; as usual, an outside threat solidifies domestic support.

Ahmadinejad’s intemperate statements, which no one can control, are an embarrassment to many of his colleagues, but his ability to act is strictly controlled by others.

Third, because of assassination or imprisonment of opposition voices and the imposition of a climate of menacing fear and because of a governmental structure giving total political control to a small coterie of senior Islamic clerics, governmental leadership rests in just a few hands.

An unelected Supreme Leader, an unelected Council of Guardians and an unelected Expediency Council have control of all aspects of government and the institutions of the republic. Widely held in contempt, they rule, not by respect or admiration, but by fear.

Fourth, to the majority of the highly nationalistic Iranian public, nuclear weapons per se are of little importance, but national prestige, the ability to play an important role in regional affairs and, above all, security arrangements that protect them from invasion or even domination by “outsiders” are paramount.

Events in Iraq, coupled with repeated U.S. talk of “regime change,” have convinced Iranians that the U.S. threat to Iran is real and imminent.

Fifth, current economic and social conditions in Iran are a continuing disappointment for Iranians, even with recently enhanced oil revenues. Unemployment is high, inflation rampant, the stock market in turmoil, domestic investment low and the jobless rural poor are flooding the cities. More than a million young Iranians enter the labor force each year, while fewer than 400,000 jobs are created annually; and the “brain drain” of educated and well-trained Iranians is high and increasing.

Ahmadinejad's campaign promise to divert more resources to the poor has not been realized; his recent announcement of Iranian financial aid to the Hamas government of Palestine has brought public demonstrations demanding that the funds be spent instead for the poor in Iran.

Economic performance is Ahmadinejad's weak point, appeals to national pride his strong point.

Sixth, Iran's moves toward the development of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them are unquestionably real. If they are not stopped, the only question is at what point they will become a "clear and present danger" that, for the safety of the rest of the world, must be neutralized, regardless of cost or ramifications.

Where does all this leave us? Opinions vary, but here are mine:

a) Iran and the U.S. are two nations whose economic and geopolitical interests should rationally dovetail; they are heading toward conflict due to ideological differences about popular democracy and about "separation of church and state," but, above all, about the Iranian leadership's messianic views reflected in state-supported international terrorism and the development of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them.

The key question facing the West is in whose favor time is working.

If Iran's Islamic fanaticism will in time be a spent force, as many believe, working strenuously to forestall the development of Iranian nuclear weapons in the short run by negotiation should be the West's over-riding concern.

If the Islamic messianic movement continues to broaden and strengthen, other strategies must prevail.

b) One staunch Republican, Richard Nixon, neutralized the threat from Mao Tse Tung by demanding a change of "actions," not "regime," and peace prevailed. Another staunch Republican, Ronald Reagan, neutralized Mikhail Gorbachev by demanding a change of "actions," not "regime," and peace prevailed. Eventually, of course, in each case "regime change" did occur, but not through outside military action.

The constantly-reiterated American goal of “regime change” in Iran may be the key factor in preventing progress in changing “actions,” since everyone in Iran considers America determined to overthrow the regime. There is general consensus that “giving in” to the U.S. on anything will merely encourage the U.S. to demand more and more concessions.

Iran’s ambassador to the U.N., a polished and eloquent diplomat of the old school (reminiscent of Brasidas, the charming and articulate foreign spokesman for ancient Sparta) insists that Iran is reasonable and is ready to negotiate all issues; but we do not know for whom he speaks. At this stage, we should pursue his offer (without deferring powerful international actions to compel Iran to end nuclear weapon development).

c) Offering face-saving “carrots” of major and compelling economic incentives (such as membership in the World Trade Organization), including internationally guaranteed availability of nuclear fuel for Iran’s peaceful purposes, and offering appropriate, internationally-backed security guarantees giving Iran real and effective protection against U.S. invasion, could change the nature of current negotiations.

In return, the West could require a nuclear nonproliferation agreement with enforceable and verifiable provisions that would preclude the subterfuge and trickery the Iranians have practiced in the past.

The offer of such a Grand Detente—bringing Iran back into the community of nations—should include an end to Iran’s state-sponsored terrorism abroad and a “stand down” on the Israeli question, but it must also include such economic inducements and security guarantees that it would be seen not as a defeat for anyone, but as a victory for all concerned.

The offer of such a package would demonstrate to the world and to the Iranian public that the American President is not the psychological counterpart of the Iranian President, which is what many throughout the world believe him to be.

Threatening Iran tends to unify that nation behind its leadership;

offering major economic and security benefits could help drive a wedge between the government and the Iranian public.

With \$51 billion of exports and \$48 billion of imports last year, Iran does not want to be an international pariah. Its need for foreign capital investment and technical know-how to modernize and upgrade its petrochemical sector is desperate, if only to stop wasting the \$2 billion a year worth of natural gas it is burning off or to end its need to import gasoline because its refineries are inadequate.

The reply made by opponents of a Grand Détente proposal is that the Europeans have hinted at it in the past and they have been rejected by the Iranians.

In reality, the good faith of the U.S. is questioned because of its insistence on “regime change,” and our offers have heretofore not been considered real. A Grand Détente— involving all major international and regional powers, European, Russian, Chinese and Arab, as well as U.S.—is not the same as U.S. offers to discuss a specific problem.

d) In the final analysis, it may be that real negotiations are not possible and force may be necessary to neutralize an Iranian nuclear threat.

In such case, international economic force in all its many forms should be applied before military force is resorted to; both for practical reasons (it may work) and to gain international support for subsequent military action.

e) These, too, are “the times that try men’s souls,” and we must seek the least bad option.

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