

Obama: a new beginning for American-Iranian relations?

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, DEC 21 2008

“Change” is the defining theme in the vision of Barack Obama for the future of American politics. Indeed, his proclaimed mission not only encompasses the transformation of American internal politics, but it also includes changing the direction of the US foreign policy. In that light, some have assumed that his arrival on the centre stage of American politics will mark a watershed in Iranian-American relations.

Although, Obama’s rhetoric regarding direct negotiations with Iran has made many people overexcited, his approach does not seem to be much different from the policies of the Bush administration. The change is going to be more cosmetic rather than anything fundamental. Although American leaders have successfully banked on people’s fear, under Obama’s administration we are likely to hear a different set of political terminology articulating the differences between the two states. Yet the new president is going to be as inflexible as the previous one in relation to nuclear developments in Iran.

Considering Obama’s campaign rhetoric, it is likely that the new administration will attempt to move away from Bush’s paradigm of fear and the preoccupation with the national security doctrine in order to justify an aggressive foreign policy. That means we are unlikely to hear another “axis of evil” speech guilty of crude oversimplification of the notion of “threat” in the context of “War on Terror”. However, as much as the change of political language towards Iran is going to be refreshing for the politicians in Tehran, the source of tensions will remain the same.

During his presidential campaign and after his election, Obama made it clear that he will not tolerate a nuclear Iran and he will do everything in his power to prevent the country becoming a nuclear reality. His choice of Rahm Emanuel, a 48-year-old congressional representative from Chicago, as his Chief of Staff is not an accident. This is an obvious sign that he is not going to be soft on Iran. Emanuel, who is widely known as a pro-Zionist hardliner, holds both an American and an Israeli passport and he famously joined the Israeli army reserve during the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. Although Obama mobilized voters to bring change to the White House, change will not go far enough to compromise America’s entrenched strategic alliance with the Jewish state in the Middle East. As long as the idea of nuclear Iran continues to keep Washington’s Israeli allies awake at night, the coming administration will do everything possible to prevent Iran’s advancement towards nuclear power. Thus Obama, like his predecessor, will guarantee Israel’s monopoly over nuclear weapons in the region.

Although, the nuclear issue is an important source of tension, we should not reduce thirty years of animosity to one single factor, which mainly has been the centre of attention over the last five years. If there was any revolutionary shift in American foreign policy towards Iran and if hypothetically the nuclear issue was resolved today, we would still be unlikely to see any sign of immediate reconciliation between the two states in the near future. We should not forget that the regime in Tehran justifies its political existence through its “Zede-Estemar” (anti-imperial) mandate. The Iranian regime claims to be based on a revolution, which ended American “semi-colonialism” in Iran. They legitimize their arrival on the Iranian political scene by “cutting hands” of what Ayatollah Khomeini described as the “Great Satan”.

The notion of “resistance” against what they describe as American “hegemony” is part of an ideological

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superstructure that has not been disputed since the revolution. The presence of an “external enemy” and the call for struggle in resisting it, works as an ideological perpetuation of a revolution that ironically seventy percent of the population cannot recall anymore, as they are not old enough! For about a generation, rightly or wrongly, the regime systematically has injected anti-Americanism into the collective political consciousness. The regime has held America responsible for the shortcomings and obstacles that people have had to face. America was blamed for the Iraqi invasion and the rivers of blood in the cities devastated by eight years of war. America constantly has been blamed for the instability of Iranian economy and the corruption of the Iranian youth. Even the popularity of American cultural products such as movies and music has been seen as part of a “cultural invasion” and accordingly they have been held responsible for “deviating” youth from the path of Islam.

As a child living in post-revolutionary Iran, I was brought up in a climate in which the portrayal of America as “the Great Satan” was part of everyday life. Every morning in the school assembly, we had to curse America – the “enemy of Islam” and the “Islamic regime”. From time to time, we were taken to marches, orchestrated by the government to see the burning of American flags and express our “uncompromising” anti-Americanism. Obviously, within a hierocratic establishment, the sense of antagonism towards the US was also an integral part of religious practices. Every single Friday prayers in the country started and ended with masses chanting “death to America... death to America”. Clearly, the Islamic Republic’s position towards the US is not only a matter of foreign policy that can be altered by the sudden change of political circumstances; it is indeed a reflection of a political ideology that defines the “legitimizing” discourse of the Islamic Republic. In the case of Iran, it is very hard to disassociate the internal political dynamics from the external ones. Iranian foreign policy towards the United States has grave implications for running the everyday political affairs of the country.

The recent rhetoric of the existing Supreme Leader, the most powerful individual within the establishment, indicates that he is inclined to maintain the legacies of the founder of the Islamic Republic by continuing the antagonistic attitude towards United States.

It is fascinating that even after his death, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the revolution, plays a crucial role in the political life of the regime. Within the framework of Iranian politics, Khomeini is still an undisputable reference point. Any major policy shift should theoretically correspond with the “legacies of the Imam”. Even liberals and the reformist have to refer selectively to the Imam in order to legitimize their visions for change. Hence, he is the source of legitimacy for the hardliners as well as the reformists and both sides of the spectrum claim to be the real defenders of his heritage!

Recently, there have been heated debates among the people in power regarding the Imam’s “real position” on America. The debate started when the pragmatist Ayatollah Rafsanjani quoted the Imam in his multivolume memoirs, saying that Ayatollah Khomeini approved the proposal to omit the rallying slogan “death to America”. Although he is known as one of the most dominant figures within the establishment, his book was banned and collected from bookstores a few days after its publication. That indicates that there are some voices within the regime favor more diplomatic relations with the United States. However, the hardliners ideologically and militantly aim to maintain the orthodox policies of the Islamic State towards America.

The Clinton administration was the Islamic Republic’s best chance to normalize ties. In March 2000, the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright went as far as apologizing for the US intervention in Iran before the revolution and called for a new American-Iranian relationship. In a gesture of good faith, she lifted sanctions on Iranian exports. The reformist government of Khatami welcomed the move, but the existing Supreme Leader described it as “deceitful” and “belated” and the opportunity was lost.

Certainly, in the existing climate, Obama cannot afford to be as soft as Clinton on Iran, as a nuclear Iran would undoubtedly constitute a ‘game-changer’ and jeopardise America’s strategic interests and shift the balance of power in the region. Obama has already stated that a nuclear Iran is not going to be an option, while on other hand, Iran has made it clear that it will not give up its cause. Apart from the deep historical and ideological complexities, the nuclear issue will continue to be the main source of tension as both sides are determined to stick to their policies.

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