

Obama's Heavy Agenda: Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine ...

Iranian Expectations from Obama

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Global Research, November 20, 2008

20 November 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN, IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#), [IRAQ REPORT](#), [PALESTINE](#)

All eyes have been riveted on the U.S. elections, and with good reason. The hated Bush-Cheney regime has finally been sent packing, and peoples around the world have been joining Americans, not only in breathing a sigh of relief, but in daring to hope that a real change may emerge in U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

Iran is one among many countries where Barack Obama's victory has ignited hope, specifically, that normal relations between this leading Persian Gulf power and the U.S. may be reestablished, almost 30 years after they had been broken, in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution. What the incoming Obama Administration does vis-a-vis Iran, could have a decisive impact on the elections that that country will be holding next year in June, for its president. And that, in turn, could contribute to shaping developments in the region, not only the Persian Gulf, but Central Asia and beyond.

What Barack Obama will do after being sworn in on January 20, we will learn soon after that date. Since his victory, he has been working feverishly with his transition team, and intends to hit the ground running. This means we can expect major policy initiatives to be announced soon after inauguration, and presented to Congress. Obama has repeatedly stressed that his primary focus will be to deal with the unprecedented financial and economic crisis that has engulfed the world. However, certain foreign policy issues demand attention, and are likely not to be postponed.

As far as Iran is concerned, Obama made a pledge during his campaign, that he would be ready to meet with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, without preconditions, although of course not without preparation. That is, such a ground-breaking encounter would have to be carefully prepared by direct bilateral contacts at a lower level. Because the U.S. and Iran have had no diplomatic relations since 1979, there have also been no official bilateral contacts, and all business has been conducted through the Swiss Embassy in Tehran and Washington, which has functioned as the liaison.

Congress and Majlis

Discreet attempts have been made in recent years to put Iranians and Americans in contact, especially at the level of the Congress and the Majlis (Parliament). In September 2000, at the time of the presidency of reformist leader Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, there was one such encounter, during an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, between U.S. lawmakers and the then-speaker of the Iranian parliament Mehdi Karroubi. Among those taking part were Gary L. Ackerman and Eliot L. Engel, Democratic congressmen from New York, and Malcolm Hoehnlein, from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. On the Iranian side, there was also a Jewish member of parliament.

Since 2007, laudatory and serious efforts have been made by sane elements of the U.S. Congress and Senate, to reach out to their Iranian counterparts, to open a channel of communication. The Dialogue Caucus initiated by Cong. Wayne T. Gilchrest and others, was set up to initiate contact with Iranian parliamentarians. This author has followed the process with interest, in Washington as well as in Tehran. The matter was extremely delicate, since any visit of U.S. political figures to Iran would touch nerves on both sides: Arch-conservatives in the Iranian political establishment would balk at having such guests, which could make the visa process difficult, and their neoconservative counterparts in Washington would seize on the event to denounce anyone pursuing such dialogue, as “appeasers,” meeting with “pro-terrorists” or even “anti-Semites” — given certain controversial statements by the Iranian president on Israel. Visits of Iranian political figures to the U.S. have been severely hampered by absurd visa restrictions, not to mention the distasteful practice of fingerprinting. (In retaliation, Iranian fingerprint Americans arriving at Tehran airport.) Options for contact in a third country have not occurred. Nonetheless, over the past year, there was an exchange of letters between the Caucus and the Iranian Majlis, putting out feelers for how the process could move forward.

Now, it appears that further progress has been made. On the sidelines of the IMF meeting in Washington, a group of Iranian parliamentarians met with members of the U.S. Congress, according to Peyamner New Agency on October 19 (<http://www.peyamner.com/details.aspx?l=4&id=89105>). One member of the Majlis, Mohammad Kazem Delkosh, was quoted saying that they, the Iranian MPs, were open to negotiations with any country except Israel, and referenced the Dialogue Caucus’s letter to Gholam Ali Haddad, then speaker of the Majlis. The new speaker, Ali Larijani, has not responded to the letter, but has publicly taken note of the desire of U.S. lawmakers to link up with their Iranian counterparts.

Even more recently, a group of U.S. congresswomen issued a request to meet with their Iranian counterparts, as reported by PressTV on November 19.

These are contacts roughly made on the level of those at the Met years ago: informal, without any official protocol or agenda, relaxed, and simply personal. Nonetheless, as Iranian sources have stressed to this author, such events are of utmost importance, as they

demonstrate a non-belligerent attitude on the part of well-meaning American figures, an attitude which is crucial to overcoming the historically determined skepticism of the Iranians, regarding the possibility of any rational relationship with the U.S. It is also a fact, known at least to insiders, that many diplomats from the U.S. and Iran have struck up acquaintances and maintained contact, albeit informally and off the record, in a number of important posts, including in Europe. Such contacts are precious.

Iranian Expectations from Obama

Now, it is up to President-elect Obama to call the next moves. In Iran (and not only in Iran), his election was greeted with joy and great expectations. This author was interviewed on Iranian state radio and television (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting-*IRIB*) just one day prior to the vote, and was asked, of course, what Obama's policy to Iran would be. The only answer I could give was, we have to wait until January 20. However, certain trends should be clear.

It is not a question of Obama's policy to Iran in and of itself; rather, it is a question of how he will attempt to deal with the burning crises in the region, where Iran can be an influential factor. Among the multiple challenges that the incoming U.S. leader will face, and which the international press has rightly defined as the great expectations his victory has generated, are the Iraq war, the Afghan war, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the so-called Iranian nuclear crisis.

Barack Obama made several important pledges during his election regarding what he would do about problems in the region. First, he promised that, if elected, he would withdraw U.S. troops within 16 months. If he is inaugurated on January 20, 2009, that means the U.S. troops should leave by May 2010, of course, in a phased withdrawal fashion. Obama has since indicated he would consult with military leaders in the region, to ensure that such a withdrawal plan were feasible and that the security of Iraq could be ensured. Regarding Afghanistan, Obama's policy statements have been the most problematic, to put it kindly. He pledged to pull out of Iraq, largely in order to redeploy US troops to Afghanistan, to seek out, find and kill, or capture Bin Laden. He also proposed deploying U.S. troops from Pakistani territory against Al Qaida forces in the border tribal area or across the border into Afghanistan, were the Pakistani forces unwilling or unable to do so. Such cross-border raids have been launched by the Bush-Cheney regime over the past months, and have led to the deaths of mainly civilians. This has created a political crisis for Afghan President Karzai, as well as for Pakistani President Zardari, who have both convincingly pleaded the case for "national sovereignty" to be respected. There are encouraging signs, meanwhile, that the Obama camp has also begun to rethink strategy for Afghanistan. According to an article by Karen DeYoung on November 11 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/10/AR2008111002897...>), the Obama team is considering a regional approach to Afghanistan, which would include talks with Iran, and tolerance of Afghan government political talks with moderate Taliban

elements.

As for the Arab-Israeli conflict per se, there are many question marks hanging over the policy of the incoming administration. Although Obama during the campaign paid homage to Israel, as must any American pretender to the throne, he has also spoken out in favor of the Saudi-sponsored Middle East peace plan from 2002. This plan, articulated by the Saudis, and endorsed by the Arab League that year, foresaw a peace agreement, whereby all the Arabs would recognize Israel on the basis of a return to the 1967 borders, i.e. a return of Arab lands in the West Bank and Golan Heights, and the establishment of a Palestinian state within those borders and with a capital in East Jerusalem. Recently, some Israeli leaders have moved to declare their support for this plan, but, if one reads the fine print, they have been calling for a “renegotiation” of the plan. This is something which Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak rightly rejected, so the issue remains: will Israel accept the original plan or not? More to the point: will the new U.S. government energetically endorse the same?

It is a geostrategic fact, obvious to anyone who can read a map, that neither Afghanistan nor Iraq, nor Palestine, can be stabilized without the cooperation of Iran. Thus the intense interest among Tehran’s political elite, in the new American President’s policy options. In order for the security of Iraq to be guaranteed, there must be an agreement, not only between the main occupying forces (U.S. and Iraq), but among all the regional neighbors of Iraq.

SOFA: Potentials and Dangers

The proposed agreement between the U.S. and Iraq is, as of this writing, still somewhat up in the air. This deal, known as the SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement), has been hotly debated in Iraqi political circles and contested in mass protests in the streets over the past months. It was signed by U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari on November 16. Although the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki subsequently agreed to the heavily amended text, it still has to be approved by the Iraqi parliament. If the deal does pass in a session scheduled for November 24, that vote will have to be ratified by the President Jalal Talabani and his two vice presidents.

From the outset, the SOFA had come under harsh criticism, on grounds that it would not guarantee the independence and sovereignty of Iraq. Early drafts in fact would have made it possible for numerous U.S. bases to remain, along with troops, for an undetermined length of time; U.S. troops and defense contractors would enjoy de facto immunity; U.S. forces could detain Iraqis, and so forth.

The leading Shi'ite opposition came from Moqtadar al Sadr, and Grand Ayatollah Ali Hosseini al-Sistani. Al-Sadr is a powerful militia leader who controls 30 members of parliament, whereas al-Sistani is the supreme Shi'ite religious authority, based in the holy city of Najaf, whose judgment is politically decisive. It was repeated as late as November 14, that al-Sistani would "directly intervene" if the final text were considered a breach of sovereignty. On the following day, a delegation of Shi'ite lawmakers, led by Ali al-Adeeb, head of the United Iraqi Alliance, and Khalid al-Attayah, deputy parliament speaker, travelled to Najaf to meet with the senior cleric, and submitted to him a final draft of the SOFA. According to a *Washington Post* report on November 16, an official in al-Sistani's office said that the latter "gave the Iraqi side the green light to sign it." That same day, a short release was issued by *IRIB*, which quoted al-Adeeb, following the meeting, to the effect that the Grand Ayatollah had said that the prerequisite for his positive evaluation of the deal would be a national consensus among the different sectors of Iraqi politics and society. He urged the Iraqi leaders of different factions to study the document carefully, from the standpoint of ensuring the country's national sovereignty and independence. In a further clarification, given in the form of an answer by the Ayatollah to a question submitted by a follower regarding his approval or not, al-Sistani's office reportedly said he wanted the deal to ensure the "restoration of full sovereignty and the realization of Iraq's stability and security." He said he wanted the agreement to "win the support of all Iraqis and their main political groups." In conclusion, the statement said, "Any agreement that does not meet these two demands ... cannot be accepted" and urged Iraqi parliamentarians to "rise to their historic responsibility before God and the people." This was reported by *AP* on November 18. Still further details of al-Sistani's stance were provided by *PressTV* on November 19, which reported the Ayatollah had said much the same in a meeting with Ahmad Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, adding the important detail, that "The Shia cleric stressed that the security agreement should also include a U.S. promise to remove Iraq from Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter."

The Iraqi government endorsed the SOFA on November 16, following the consultations with al-Sistani in Najaf. Since the government coalition includes the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, — which had vowed to reject the deal unless al-Sistani approved it — the implication is that the Grand Ayatollah is understood to have given at least his tacit approval. That notwithstanding, Shi'ite militia leader Moqtadar al-Sadr said he would attempt to block the deal in Parliament, with his 30, out of 275 members. In a statement read out at Friday prayers November 14 in Kufa, al-Sadr had said: "I repeat my call on the occupier to get out from the land of our beloved Iraq, without retaining bases or signing agreements. If they do stay," it went on, "I urge the honorable resistance fighters ... to direct their weapons exclusively against the occupier." When the text was presented for parliamentary debate on November 19, protest led by his faction against the SOFA led to fisticuffs.

If Ayatollah al-Sistani did indeed give the go-ahead, it was because several major demands he had been making, appear to have been met. Following his visit to Najaf, Khalid al-Attaya stated that "the Americans have responded on two important amendments. The first one is the Americans should withdraw from cities and suburbs on June 30, 2009, and the second one is that Americans should leave Iraq in 2011." Firm dates for withdrawal had been consistently demanded by the Iraqis while the Bush-Cheney White House had continued to

talk about “aspirational dates.” And, the agreement does state explicitly that “with the termination on December 31, 2008 of the Chapter VII mandate and authorization for the multinational force contained in resolution 1790, Iraq should return to the legal and international standing that it enjoyed prior to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 661 (1990), and that the United States shall use its best efforts to help Iraq take the steps necessary to achieve this by December 31, 2008.”

Other important concessions appear to have been won by the Iraqis, if the text of the agreement circulating on the internet is indeed the final version (<http://www.antiwar.com> and <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/2008/11/18/breaking-text-of-status-of-forces-agreement/>). Throughout the text, guarantees of Iraqi sovereignty are asserted, “over its territory, waters, and airspace” and in accordance with the U.N. Charter. Regarding military missions, all U.S. operations must be carried out in agreement and coordinated with the Iraqi government, in “full respect for the Iraqi Constitution and the laws of Iraq.” Regarding withdrawal, firm dates are set in Article 24: “All United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011.” And: “All United States combat forces shall withdraw from Iraqi cities, villages, and localities no later than the time at which Iraqi Security Forces assume full responsibility for security in an Iraqi province, provided that such withdrawal is completed no later than June 30, 2009.” Such dates are presented as outside limits, since Iraq may ask the U.S. to leave “at any time” and the U.S. may also decide to withdraw “at any time.” The two sides will set “mechanisms and arrangements” for phased withdrawal.

As for the fate of the U.S. bases, an optimistic reading of the text would imply that they would be turned over to the Iraqis. Article 5, on Property Ownership, states: “Upon their withdrawal, the United States Forces shall return to the Government of Iraq all the facilities and areas provided for the use of the United States, based on two lists.” The first list will take effect as soon as the agreement takes effect; “The second list shall take effect no later than June 30, 2009....” The “agreed facilities and areas”, according to Article 2, Definition of Terms, refer to “those Iraqi facilities and areas owned by the Government of Iraq that are in use by the United States Forces during the period in which this agreement is in force.” Does this include the bases?

Further on, in Article 28, it is stated that: “Upon entry into force of this Agreement the Government of Iraq shall have full responsibility for the Green Zone,” though it “may request ... limited and temporary support” of the U.S.

Other important aspects of the agreement relate to legal matters and jurisdiction, which had been a major bone of contention. According to the cited text, Article 12, “Iraq shall have the primary right to exercise jurisdiction over members of the United States Forces and of the civilian component for the grave premeditated felonies enumerated pursuant to paragraph 8, when such crimes are committed outside agreed facilities and areas and outside duty status.” And, “Iraq shall have the primary right to exercise jurisdiction over United States contractors and United States contractor employees.” The U.S. would then have jurisdiction

over its military and civilians “inside agreed facilities and areas.”

In the same department, Iraq also won some concessions regarding detention of its citizens. In Article 22, it says: “No detention or arrest may be carried out by the United States Forces (except with respect to detention or arrest of members of the United States Forces and of the civilian component), except through an Iraqi decision in accordance with Iraqi law and pursuant to Article 4” which deals with the conduct of the missions, cited above. Furthermore, if U.S. forces do detain Iraqis, they have to be delivered to Iraqi authorities within 24 hours. Article 22 also spells out procedures whereby the U.S. has to hand over to the Iraqis information on all detainees, and to deliver detainees who are wanted by Iraq, once the agreement enters into force. All other detainees should be released. (One wonders: what will be the fate of former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz?) The U.S. is not allowed to conduct searches without an Iraqi warrant and in coordination with the Baghdad government.

Finally, there are provisions made to help alleviate Iraq’s debt burden. And, most important for Iraq’s neighbors, there is a provision prohibiting the use of Iraq for aggression: “Iraqi land, sea, and air shall not be used as a launching or transit point for attacks against other countries.”

Clearly only an expert in international law (which this author is not) can adequately evaluate this document. On face value, it appears to constitute a victory for the Iraqi nationalist forces, and this is how Gareth Porter has analyzed it in his piece published November 19 in <http://www.antiwar.com>, entitled “Pact Will End Iraqi Dependence on US Military.” One can only hope that analysis is borne out by events.

What this author, declaredly not a legal expert, can offer are a few caveats and questions. First, why has President Bush repeatedly insisted that the SOFA, whenever it were to be signed, would be a non-binding document? Why is there a clause at the end of the text, in Article 30, that says the agreement is to last 3 years, “unless terminated sooner by either Party” by written notification? Is this what Bush meant? Why, also, are there clauses in Article 27 that stress the close cooperation, also military, between the two, to deter threats to Iraq sovereignty, independence, etc.? Does this constitute *carte blanche* for the U.S. to intervene again?

Iranian Responses

It is in light of these possible ambiguities, that the apparently contradictory statements coming out of Iran in reaction to the SOFA, can be read. On the one hand, the head of the Judiciary, Mahmood Hashemi Shahroudi, was quoted saying, “The Iraqi government has

performed well and we hope that the result will be to the benefit of Islam and the sovereignty of Iraq.” Shahroudi, who is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, went on to say, “Security and stability is in the interest of the regional nations. We hope the American troops leave Iraq according to the pact.” On the other hand, Ali Larijani, the former nuclear negotiator and now speaker of the Parliament, — and also advisor to the Leader —, congratulated the Iraqis for their gains but said they had not gone far enough. “With this so-called security pact,” he said according to *IRNA*, “they were after turning Iraq into another U.S. state but the Iraqi sources of jurisprudence, government and nation resisted for eight months and changed the articles of the pact seven times.” He added, “The Iraqi nation and parliament should realize that the time for resistance is not over yet.” Specifically, Larijani said troops should leave earlier: “The proposal by the newly elected U.S. president to withdraw the forces within 16 months is more suitable.” He also charged there were certain technical errors that should be corrected prior to parliamentary approval.

Not only in Iran, but also in other neighboring countries, like Turkey, the agreement is being examined carefully, and it can be expected that contacts will be made between Baghdad and regional capitals to further discuss the perspectives. Over the past year or so, there have been a series of meetings of Iraq’s neighbors, regarding the country’s future, as well as three meetings among representatives from Iraq, Iran and the U.S. Further such contacts are on hold until the White House changes tenants.

The View from Washington

If there are a lot of questions still open on the Iraqi side, there are as many on the U.S. side. First, as noted above, outgoing President Bush has told Congress (which apparently will not have its say), he considers the deal “non-binding.” More important, Obama stated again in an interview, that immediately after inauguration, he would call together the top military leaders to plot out a withdrawal plan. From what is known of the SOFA, there should be no reason why U.S. troops could not be withdrawn *before* the designated dates, for example, within Obama’s projected timeframe. The key issue here, which the military will certainly raise, is: What guarantees are there for real stability, including through regional cooperative agreements? Ultimately, the question to be addressed by the new administration is much broader: Is there a real commitment to restoring Iraq’s sovereignty? If so, that implies fundamental changes, not only in the military deployment, but regarding economic, financial and monetary policy. Who, for example, is to control Iraq’s oil resources? Stability in Iraq and the region will demand a total revamping of U.S. foreign policy and *thinking*.

A New Washington Consensus?

Just prior to and following Obama’s stunning victory, a number of authoritative policy-shapers in Washington spoke out on what the new administration should do regarding the complex of crises in this region. Lawrence J. Korb and Laura Conley, a former Reagan

administration official and an assistant at the Center for American Progress, respectively, issued an OpEd in the *Boston Globe* on October 24, entitled “The Contributions of Iran” (http://www.boston.globe/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/10/24/the_cont...). The gist of their argument was that the Islamic Republic had indeed lent a helping hand in Afghanistan; yet, though acknowledged by some Bush Administration figures, like former envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins, Washington “failed to capitalize on the possibilities of that strategic relationship.” Now, the authors reasoned, the Afghan mess is getting worse, and no military action alone will achieve success “without a renewed commitment to diplomacy and the engagement of Afghanistan’s neighbors.” And, they conclude, “Iran is the indispensable player in this process.”

About the same time, former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns published a piece in *Newsweek* entitled, “We Should Talk to Our Enemies” (<http://www.newsweek.com/id/165650>). Referring to his 27 years as a career diplomat in governments of both parties, Burns weighed in against the McCain-Palin ticket for their attacks on Obama’s willingness to engage. He recalled that many U.S. leaders, from Eisenhower to Kennedy, Nixon to Reagan, had all talked to their “enemies” of the day, and had reached tangible results. “Iran is a case in point” at the current juncture, Burns wrote. He proposed the next U.S. President should initiate contacts at a lower level, and, if reasonable, proceed to direct talks. Pointing to the absurdity of the policy of non-contact over almost 30 years, Burns said this had only led to isolation — of the U.S.! “To illustrate how far we have isolated ourselves,” he noted, “think about this: I served as the Bush administration’s point man on Iran for three years but was never permitted to meet an Iranian.” Burns concluded with reference to the obvious: no U.S. government is going to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and establish Arab-Israeli peace, without coming to terms with Iran.

The most recent high-powered intervention into this debate came on November 17, in the form of a Joint Experts’ Statement on Iran (<http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii>), which was presented at a conference of the National American Iranian Council in Washington on November 18. Among the authors of the report are Iran experts, both American (Juan R.I. Cole, Stephen Kinzer, A. Richard Norton, Richard Parker, etc.) and Iranian, or Iranian-American (Ali Banuazizi, Mehrzad Broujerdi, Farideh Farhi, Trita Parsi, among others), former diplomats (Ambassadors James F. Dobbins, William G. Miller, Thomas Pickering), intelligence experts (Philip Giraldi, Emile A. Nakhleh), and others. Their approach is straightforward: since “isolation, threats and sanctions” have failed over decades, more of the same would only be worse; what is required is to “Open the door to direct, unconditional and comprehensive negotiations at the senior diplomatic level where personal contacts can be developed, intentions tested, and possibilities explored on both sides.” Calling for contacts among “scholars, professionals, religious leaders, lawmakers and ordinary citizens,” the experts outline five steps the U.S. should take, followed by a list of “myths” that should be dispelled.(1) The steps include the following: “1. replace calls for regime change with a long-term strategy; 2. Support human rights through effective, international means,” — i.e. abandoning any political interference; “3. Allow Iran a place at the table - alongside other key states -in shaping the future of Iraq, Afghanistan and the region; 4. Address the nuclear issue within the context of a broader U.S.-Iran opening; 5. Re-energize the Arab-Israeli peace process and act as an honest broker in that process.”

All these moves involve radically redefining the U.S.'s relations to Iran, in recognition of the simple fact that none of the regional crises has a prayer of being resolved without Tehran's direct contribution. The report references the Iraq Study Group's recommendations in this light, adding that Washington should name a special envoy to work with Iran on such issues of joint concern, as Iraqi and Afghan stability. (It is to be hoped that if such an envoy is named, it will not be Dennis Ross, who was instrumental in wrecking the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.) Just as reasonable is the report's sober recognition of the fact that Iran's good relations with Hezbollah and Hamas could be considered as part of the solution, not the problem, even to the benefit of Israel in the long run.

Elections in Iran

How will developments in Washington affect the future of Iran? As noted above, most Iranian political figures were outspoken in their support of the new U.S. president-elect. President Ahmadinejad sent Obama a congratulatory letter, the first time a person in his position has addressed a U.S. president-elect since the 1979 revolution (<http://www.iranmania.com> November 19). In it, he urged Obama to make the most of the opportunities afforded him. Ahmadinejad wrote: "People in the world expect war-oriented policies, occupation, bullying, deception and intimidation of nations and imposing discriminatory policies on them and international affairs, which have evoked hatred toward American leaders, to be replaced by ones advocating justice, respect for human rights, friendship and noninterference in other countries' affairs." He added: "They also want the U.S. intervention to be limited to its borders, especially in the sensitive region of the Middle East. It is expected to reverse the unfair attitude of the past 60 years to restore the rights of people in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan."

Gary Samore, of the Council on Foreign Relations, advised Obama to ignore the letter, so as not to enhance Ahmadinejad's position, and to seek out contact instead with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Trita Parsi of the NIAC, agreed, saying the Iranian leader wanted to "impose himself on Obama and essentially signal him 'you can't get around me,' while Obama is probably thinking about getting around him." Israeli leader Tzipi Livni predictably advised Obama that any response would be seen as a sign of weakness. Obama himself acknowledged receipt of the letter and said he would respond in due course.

Whatever ulterior motives there may be, the letter is not negative, and was viewed as such in Iran. In June next year, Iranian presidential elections are scheduled, and Ahmadinejad has made known his intention to run for re-election, so it may be he intended to profile himself as conciliatory with his letter. Other likely candidates have been performing the time-honored ritual of denying their electoral ambitions. Reformist Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who was elected in 1997, and served two terms, has said he has not yet decided on a candidacy. One reason is that, as he experienced in office, the presidency does not wield

the power required to make radical reforms. If he decides not to run, former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi has indicated he could represent the reformist camp. Ali Larijani has been mooted as well, although he has denied any such ambitions. Iranian sources say that current Tehran mayor Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf will definitely be a candidate. Former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati is another possibility.

If the Obama victory came about as a result of the voters' desire to redefine economic policy in the crisis, and to re-establish for the U.S. a positive image through a sane foreign policy, much the same can be said of the upcoming elections in Iran. Candidates will be judged according to their proposals to rescue the economy, and their attitude toward what many hope will be a new American policy. Thus, what the Obama administration does will count in Tehran, and the region.

Notes

1. The myths, or misconceptions, listed recall, in part, those developed in Trita Parsi's excellent book (*Treacherous Alliance: The secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States*). The report sets the score straight: that the Supreme Leader, not the Iranian President is what his title says — supreme leader, and therefore definer of nuclear and foreign policy; that regime change is not on the agenda; that the Iranian leadership is not anti-American; that Iran is not committed to obliterating Israel, or to developing nuclear weapons; and so forth. If such commonplace misconceptions can be abandoned, there is hope for policymakers in Washington to begin to understand the complexities of Iran, and the region.

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