

Written by George Friedman

U.S. President Barack Obama released a video offering Iran congratulations on the occasion of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, on Friday. Israeli President Shimon Peres also offered his best wishes, referring to "the noble Iranian people." The joint initiative was received coldly in Tehran, however. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said the video did not show that the United States had shifted its hostile attitude toward Iran.

The video is obviously part of Obama's broader strategy of demonstrating that his administration has shifted U.S. policy, at least to the extent that it is prepared to open discussions with other regimes (with Iran being the hardest and most controversial case). The U.S. strategy is fairly straightforward: Obama is trying to create a new global perception of the United States. Global opinion was that former U.S. President George W. Bush was unwilling to engage with, and listen to, allies or enemies. Obama's view is that that perception in itself harmed U.S. foreign policy by increasing suspicion of the United States. For Obama, offering New Year's greetings to Iran is therefore part of a strategy to change the tone of all aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

Getting Peres to offer parallel greetings was undoubtedly intended to demonstrate to the Iranians that the Israelis would not block U.S. initiatives toward Iran. The Israelis probably were willing to go along with the greetings because they don't expect them to go very far. They also want to show that they were not responsible for their failure, something critical in their relations with the Obama administration.

The Iranian response is also understandable. The United States has made a series of specific demands on Iran, and has worked to impose economic sanctions on Iran when Tehran has not complied. But Iran also has some fairly specific demands of the United States. It might be useful, therefore, to look at the Iranian view of the United States and the world through its eyes.

From the Iranian point of view, the United States has made two fundamental demands of Iran. The first is that Iran halt its military nuclear program. The second, a much broader demand, is that Iran stop engaging in what the United States calls terrorism. This ranges from support for Hezbollah to support for Shiite factions in Iraq. In return, the United States is prepared to call for a suspension of sanctions against Iran.

For Tehran, however, the suspension of sanctions is much too small a price to pay for major strategic concessions. First, the sanctions don't work very well. Sanctions only work when most powers are prepared to comply with them. Neither the Russians nor the Chinese are prepared to systematically comply with sanctions, so there is little that Iran can afford that it can't get. Iran's problem is that it cannot afford much. Its economy is in shambles due more to internal problems than to sanctions. Therefore, in the Iranian point of view, the United States is asking

for strategic concessions, yet offering very little in return.

The nuclear question

Meanwhile, merely working on a nuclear device - regardless of how close or far Iran really is from having one - provides Iran with a dramatically important strategic lever. The Iranians learned from the North Korean experience that the United States has a nuclear fetish. Having a nuclear program alone was more important to Pyongyang than actually having nuclear weapons. U.S. fears that North Korea might someday have a nuclear device resulted in significant concessions from the United States, Japan and South Korea.

The danger of having such a program is that the United States - or some other country - might attack and destroy the associated facilities. Therefore, the North Koreans created a high level of uncertainty as to just how far along they were on the road to having a nuclear device and as to how urgent the situation was, raising and lowering alarms like a conductor in a symphony. The Iranians are following the same strategy. They are constantly shifting from a conciliatory tone to an aggressive one, keeping the United States and Israel under perpetual psychological pressure. The Iranians are trying to avoid an attack by keeping the intelligence ambiguous. Tehran's ideal strategy is maintaining maximum ambiguity and anxiety in the West while minimizing the need to strike immediately. Actually obtaining a bomb would increase the danger of an attack in the period between a successful test and the deployment of a deliverable device.

What the Iranians get out of this is exactly what the North Koreans got: disproportionate international attention and a lever on other topics, along with something that could be sacrificed in negotiations. They also have a chance of actually developing a deliverable device in the confusion surrounding its progress. If so, Iran would become invasion- and even harassment-proof thanks to its apparent instability and ideology. From Tehran's perspective, abandoning its nuclear program without substantial concessions, none of which have materialized as yet, would be irrational. And the Iranians expect a large payoff from all this.

Radical Islamists, Iraq and Afghanistan

This brings us to the Hezbollah/Iraq question, which in fact represents two very different issues. Iraq constitutes the greatest potential strategic threat to Iran. This is as ancient as Babylon and Persia, as modern as the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Iran wants guarantees that Iraq will never threaten it, and that U.S. forces in Iraq will never pose a threat to Iran. Tehran does not want promises alone; it wants a recognized degree of control over the Iraqi government, or at least negative control that would allow it to stop Baghdad from doing things Iran doesn't want. To achieve this, Iran systematically has built its influence among factions in Iraq, permitting it to block Iraqi policies that Iran regards as dangerous.

The American demand that Iran stop meddling in Iraqi policies strikes the Iranians as if the United States is planning to use the new Baghdad regime to restore the regional balance of power. In fact, that is very much on Washington's mind. This is completely unacceptable to Iran, although it might benefit the United States and the region. From the Iranian point of view, a fully neutral Iraq - with its neutrality guaranteed by Iranian influence - is the only acceptable

outcome. The Iranians regard the American demand that Iran not meddle in Iraq as directly threatening Iranian national security.

There is then the issue of Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas and other radical Islamist groups. Between 1979 and 2001, Iran represented the background of the Islamic challenge to the West: The Shia represented radical Islam. When al Qaeda struck, Iran and the Shia lost this place of honor. Now, al Qaeda has faded and Iran wants to reclaim its place. It can do that by supporting Hezbollah, a radical Shiite group that directly challenges Israel, as well as Hamas -- a radical Sunni group -- thus showing that Iran speaks for all of Islam, a powerful position in an arena that matters a great deal to Iran and the region. Iran's support for these groups helps it achieve a very important goal at little risk. Meanwhile, the U.S. demand that Iran end this support is not matched by any meaningful counteroffer or by a significant threat.

Moreover, Tehran dislikes the Obama-Petraeus strategy in Afghanistan. That strategy involves talking with the Taliban, a group that Iran has been hostile toward historically. The chance that the United States might install a Taliban-linked government in Afghanistan represents a threat to Iran second only to the threat posed to it by Iraq.

The Iranians see themselves as having been quite helpful to the United States in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as they helped Washington topple both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. In 2001, they offered to let U.S. aircraft land in Iran, and assured Washington of the cooperation of pro-Iranian factions in Afghanistan. In Iraq, they provided intelligence and helped keep the Shiite population relatively passive after the invasion in 2003. But Iranians see Washington as having betrayed implicit understandings that in return for these services, the Iranians would enjoy a degree of influence in both countries. And the U.S. opening to the Taliban is the last straw.

Obama's greetings in context

Iran views Obama's New Year greetings within this context. To them, Obama has not addressed the core issues between the two countries. In fact, apart from videos, Obama's position on Iran does not appear different from the Bush position. The Iranian leadership does not see why it should respond more favorably to the Obama administration than it did to the Bush administration. Tehran wants to be very sure that Obama understands that the willingness alone to talk is insufficient; some indications of what is to be discussed and what might be offered are necessary.

Many in the U.S. administration believe that the weak Iranian economy might shape the upcoming Iranian presidential election. Undoubtedly, the U.S. greetings were timed to influence the election. Washington has tried to influence internal Iranian politics for decades, constantly searching for reformist elements. The U.S. hope is that someone might be elected in Iran who is so obsessed with the economy that he would trade away strategic and geopolitical interests in return for some sort of economic aid. There are undoubtedly candidates who would be interested in economic aid, but none who are prepared to trade away strategic interests. Nor could they even if they wanted to. The Iran-Iraq war is burned into the popular Iranian consciousness; any candidate who appeared willing to see a strong Iraq would lose the

election. American analysts are constantly confusing an Iranian interest in economic aid with a willingness to abandon core interests. But this hasn't happened, and isn't happening now.

This is not to say that the Iranians won't bargain. Beneath the rhetoric, they are practical to the extreme. Indeed, the rhetoric is part of the bargaining. What is not clear is whether Obama is prepared to bargain. What will he give for the things he wants? Economic aid is not enough for Iran, and in any event, the idea of U.S. economic aid for Iran during a time of recession is a non-starter. Is Obama prepared to offer Iran a dominant voice in Iraq and Afghanistan? How insistent is Obama on the Hezbollah and Hamas issue? What will he give if Iran shuts down its nuclear program? It is not clear that Obama has answers to these questions.

Rebuilding the U.S. public image is a reasonable goal for the first 100 days of a presidency. But soon it will be summer, and the openings Obama has made will have to be walked through, with tough bargaining. In the case of Iran - one of the toughest cases of all - it is hard to see how Washington can give Tehran the things it wants because that would make Iran a major regional power. And it is hard to see how Iran could give away the things the Americans are demanding.

Obama indicated that it would take time for his message to generate a positive response from the Iranians. It is more likely that unless the message starts to take on more substance that pleases the Iranians, the response will remain unchanged. The problem wasn't Bush or Clinton or Reagan, the problem was the reality of Iran and the United States. Only if a third power frightened the Iranians sufficiently - a third power that also threatened the United States - would U.S.-Iranian interests be brought together. But Russia, at least for now, is working very hard to be friendly with Iran.

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