

Iran seeks detente with US

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There was an outpouring of sympathy from the Iranian people for the victims of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. In Tehran, hundreds of youth spontaneously took to the streets and held candlelight vigils for the victims. Prior to an international match against Bahrain, 40,000 football fans observed a minute's silence and Iranian sporting associations conveyed their sympathies to corresponding organisations in America.

The reaction of the people undoubtedly arises from a spontaneous feeling of solidarity, but the Iranian ruling class's recent moves towards rapprochement with the US are determined by very different considerations. Since the terrorist attacks on the US, both wings of the regime in Iran—the so-called reformers, led by President Mohamed Khatami, as well as the conservative clerics, grouped around the country's spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei—have been sending positive signals in the direction of Washington.

The day after the catastrophe President Khatami condemned the attacks and called for an international struggle against terrorism. He later qualified this with an appeal for level-headedness, demanding that the United Nations (UN) take a leading role in the campaign. Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi also spoke out against the attacks, while criticising Israel for trying to exploit the tragedy for its own "provocative reasons".

The Mayor of Tehran sent Mayor Giuliani of New York a letter of condolence in which he wrote: "We hope that, with resolute cooperation among all peace-loving nations, terrorism will be rooted out." This was the first official correspondence between an Iranian and an American office-holder in many years. A newspaper closely connected with President Khatami even called for the resumption of official political relations between both countries.

Traditional Friday prayers, the religious clerics' most important public platform, ended without the call "Down with America" for the first time since the Iranian Revolution 22 years ago. Instead, the high-ranking cleric, Ayatollah Emami Kashani, condemned the bloodbath involving "innocent men, women and children". He stressed, "The incident is worrisome and is to be condemned, but it should serve as a lesson for all the powers, especially the US, to adopt a new approach." He also criticised Israel, asserting that it had "infiltrated" the American government.

US Foreign Minister Colin Powell gave a tentative welcome to the Iranian reaction and declared that, under the circumstances, Iran had adopted a fairly positive stance worthy of further consideration. Richard Haas, a high-profile member of Powell's staff, even advocated the inclusion of Iran in the American "Anti-Terrorism Coalition".

In part the Iranian regime's moves towards the US reflects America's massive campaign of political and military intimidation. Iran stands on America's list of "rogue states" because the regime in Tehran supports Islamic and anti-Israeli forces and uses them as a lever to extend its own influence in the Middle East.

Iran is among the candidates for a possible act of reprisal from the US. The American broadcaster, *Radio Free Europe*, made this absolutely clear: "It is unlikely that Tehran is behind the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. But Tehran nurtures the roots of terrorism

that Khatami mentioned. Hate-filled and anti-American statements by Iranian political leaders send the message that violence against the US is not only acceptable but desirable. Tehran does not just promote terrorism verbally. Teheran also contributes to the problem financially and materially. According to the US Department of State, Iran is the most active state sponsor of terrorism in the world."

The radio programme ended with the open threat: "Whoever they are, the culprits are likely to pay the ultimate price for their crimes. At the same time, Tehran's ritualised anti-Americanism and its support for terrorism could come back to haunt it. On September 13, the *Washington Times* reported that a much broader war against Middle East-based terrorist organisations 'could involve attacks on training camps in Iran as well as Iraq and Afghanistan'."

However, the threat emanating from the US establishment does not in itself explain the Tehran leadership's hesitant abandonment of the traditional anti-Americanism that has constituted a central pillar of Iran's national ideology. Equally significant is Iran's catastrophic economic situation, with its explosive political consequences. The country has a foreign debt of \$9 billion, an official inflation rate of 20 percent, an unofficial unemployment rate of 30 percent and a poverty rate of almost 40 percent. Up to 750,000 additional jobs will be required every year just to provide for the coming generation of job seekers.

For a long time, opposition to these conditions has expressed itself in strikes, public protests and bloody clashes with the security forces. The Iranian leadership will not be able to keep on top of this opposition unless it receives international support. Consequently, President Khatami's reform movement is striving for a dialogue with the West. It is combining a liberal economic programme—widespread privatisation and access to foreign capital—with the promise of more democracy. This last offering should not be taken literally. Khatami has never seriously tried to counter the repressive measures taken by the conservatives, even when his closest associates were arrested or murdered.

The conservative wing of the government has long opposed an opening up to the West. It fears that the material base of its privileges—the public sector and the more backward layers of the economy—could be fatally undermined by open competition on the world market. But isolationism cannot be maintained forever. For some time, therefore, there have been signs of a conservative rapprochement with reformers, while for his part Khatami has been siding with the repressive measures of the clerics, or at least tolerating them. Public floggings, stonings and executions are on the increase, but generally the only mild criticism made by Khatami's reformers is to claim that such measures damage the image of the political system abroad and within Iran's own population.

In June, Khatami won the presidential election with a huge majority and subsequently reshuffled the government. He gave in to pressure from the hardliners in most areas of policy. As a result there is not even a single woman in the cabinet. The only important change was the replacement of Minister of Trade and Commerce Hossein Namazi, who the *Financial Times* claims "constantly advocates social justice instead of the market economy", by Tahmasb Mazaheri, who stands for an opening up of the Iranian economy. Khatami is also sticking to his previous oil minister,

Namdar Zanganeh, despite strong criticism from the conservatives. Zanganeh is responsible for negotiating “multi-million-dollar buy-back contracts with foreign companies.”

Iran’s first private bank has been opened and a law aimed at facilitating foreign investments is under discussion. Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi had already visited the US by last June and gave a speech sponsored by various oil concerns at the Columbia University. He used his talk to demand that US President Bush lift the economic sanctions against Iran. According to Kharrazi, this would also be a stimulus to the economy in the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, the US has extended the sanctions and has justified this course on the grounds of Iran’s support for Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Hizbollah and Palestinian groups like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.

President Bush’s announcement of the “war against terrorism” has accelerated political developments in Iran. The conservatives grouped around Iran’s religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had opposed the opening up of the economy not least because they feared that it would be accompanied by calls for political liberalisation. Within the framework of the “war against terrorism”, however, they have reason to believe they can open up the economy without being confronted with annoying demands for human rights and democracy.

At the same time, the Iranian regime sees the chance of asserting its own regional interests by joining an alliance against the Afghan Taliban or its old arch-enemy, Iraq.

Relations between Tehran and Kabul have been tense ever since the Taliban assumed power. From 1994 to 1996, Saudi Arabia built up the Taliban and propelled it to power with the military support of Pakistan in order to counter the influence of Iran in Afghanistan. Since then, Iran has supported the recently murdered General Ahmed Shah Massud’s “Northern Alliance”, the movement recognised by most Western powers until now as Afghanistan’s legitimate government.

The Taliban has its roots predominantly in the Paschtun ethnic group, while the Northern Alliance is being backed for the most part by Tajikistan. The alliance also embraces the religious Shiite minority, whose own brand of Islamism constitutes the official religion in Iran. Iran often regards the majority Sunni branch of Islam, to which the Taliban adhere, as heresy.

Controlling about 10 percent of Afghan territory on the border of the former Soviet Union, the Northern Alliance is supported in addition by Russia and Uzbekistan. The authoritarian regimes in these states are continually embroiled in conflicts with the armed forces of fundamentalist organisations-like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which allegedly operate from bases in Afghanistan and is supported by the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

The trade in drugs from Afghanistan is a major problem for both Iran and the former Soviet republics. In recent years, hundreds of members of various security forces have been killed in battles against drug runners on the Afghan border.

Iran enjoys fairly close economic and political cooperation with the central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Russia is keen on forming an axis with Tehran to counter the influence of the NATO state, Turkey, in the Turkish speaking central Asian republics—with the exception of Tajikistan.

Should the US feel the need to rely on support from the Northern Alliance in a military strike against Afghanistan, then it entirely possible that it would undertake a limited collaboration with Iran, the central Asian states and Russia. In Tajikistan, where the US has landing rights, Russia has also stationed 25,000 soldiers on the Afghan border, which have been put on full alert. On September 13, representatives from Iran, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan met in Dushanbe to discuss the situation in Afghanistan.

The Northern Alliance has proclaimed its willingness to cooperate with

the US. Last Sunday its foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, stated: “If the idea is to fight terrorists inside Afghanistan, the people who have been fighting them for years should be taken more seriously... Since (bin Laden’s) terrorist camps are dispersed throughout mountainous areas, how could the US reaction have any impact on terrorist activity? If our efforts are combined then an operation against them will be much more effective,” he added.

In a September 17 interview for a newspaper close to the Iranian government, *Iran News*, Mohammad Fayaz, described as a member of the High Council of the Afghan coalition, declared his support for a possible American attack on Afghanistan. “In the event it is determined and verified that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America has every right and is totally justified to retaliate against him and his organisation.”

On the same day as this interview appeared, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned in a statement of an American strike against Afghanistan, which would “inevitably lead to further human tragedies”. One day later, however, the Canadian *National Post* reported that in a telephone exchange with Canadian foreign minister Manley “high-level Iranian government officials” offered to convey their support for a military strike against Afghanistan. Manley subsequently denied this, but emphasised that in a discussion he had had with the Iranian foreign minister, Iran had “very little sympathy quite frankly for the Taliban or what they’re doing and you know, a great deal of sympathy for the situation in which the West finds itself.”

At present it is an open question whether Iran will collaborate with the US and how far such collaboration may extend. It is barely conceivable that Iran would agree to open up its airspace for American fighters based in Turkey or allow US troops on its territory. “Iran could quietly provide valuable intelligence through third countries such as Russia, other Islamic states or fellow members of the Non-Aligned Movement,” wrote the British *Times* of September 17, basing itself on comments by diplomats.

American interest in collaboration with Iran is also subject to definite limitations. Even if the country is not prominent on the list of those targeted by the US for its retaliatory attacks, Washington has little interest in strengthening Iranian influence in Afghanistan. The danger for the American establishment is that Iran would become of central importance in a region where the country constitutes a major route for the transport of oil, gas and basic commodities.

The support given to the Taliban by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was undertaken not least with the aim of encouraging the supply of oil and gas from central Asia independent of Iran. The American oil company Unocal and the Saudi company Delta Oil planned to build an oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan up to the coast of Pakistan. Until now, however, the majority of oil and gas deliveries from Turkmenistan flow through Iranian pipelines. Iran is currently massively expanding its network of pipelines and is in discussion with the Ukraine and Armenia over the transport of oil and gas. In January Iran finalised a deal with Turkey for the opening of a railway line extending from Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan) via Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Teheran to Istanbul which would then connect the economies of central Asia and Europe.

While American reaction to Iranian approaches has remained somewhat cool, it appears that European countries, and especial Germany, are making intensive efforts to develop ties with Iran. On Tuesday the Iranian news-agency IRNA reported a telephone discussion between the Iranian and German foreign ministers, in which the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, shared his concerns about the activities of the US. “Fischer, for his part, reiterated that the Islamic Republic of Iran’s concern about the reactions to the existing crisis is natural and reasonable. He said other groups in the American and European communities also feel upset about the consequences of the hasty reactions on the part of the US government.”



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