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Deadlock and Dialogue: The Principles of the "Iran Model"

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By **Robert Mason**

Ask a European diplomat what they think about Iranian negotiation strategy and they will accuse Iran of only being able to say "no". Anyone who says "yes" either does not have the authority and/or risks jeopardising their position with other factions.

What the west (defined here as the P3 + 1) may be missing is that Iran wants security more than food. That not only means domestic security which the 1979 Islamic revolution is said to have brought by integrating clergy with the Kingdom, (previously split under the Shah and during the Safavid era), but also regional security. Iran is a complex society and civilisation, and although opinion can often seem divided, key concepts which have been called the 'Iran model' by the [Institute for Political and International Studies \(IPIS\)](#), are vital to understanding Iranian thinking and foreign policy. They include a reciprocity of positive or negative relations, justice (from an Islamic point of view) and strong governance.

Western states may take issue with all these concepts in some way. Firstly, Iran will not take the confidence building steps that the IAEA/UN Security Council request. Secondly, human rights have been on the international agenda with Iran for years but have deteriorated to the point where the Obama administration has announced ["human rights sanctions"](#) against a number of individuals working in the ministries of intelligence and interior, the Revolutionary Guards and the judiciary. Thirdly, strong governance (authoritarianism) runs contrary to a western vision of the MENA region even if competing U.S. national interests produce a [confused picture](#) overall.

However, the 'Iran model' has some important implications for future dialogue between the west and Iran:

1. The Uranium swap deal is still on the table and improving cooperation on Afghanistan could boost the effectiveness of NATO forces and open up new channels for rapprochement. However, NATO in general is not well respected in Iran even if Turkey is a member state. Much has been undermined by the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative that draws together NATO and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Such an alliance on the border with Iran is perceived to be an intermediary of the U.S.; a case of perceived geo-strategic imperative pre-empting more positive and inclusive actions.
2. The EU dialogue with Iran on human rights, the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), the nuclear dossier and terrorism, ran out of steam in 2005, so now progress can only come from an improvement in bilateral relations. Within that channel, improvement could come through a shift from the governmental level to academia where more informal communication could take place. Examples of such interaction could include conferences and workshops in what are often non-aligned forums, such as the new Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Center for Human Rights and Cultural Diversity.
3. Instead of supporting what could be relatively small uprisings in Iranian cities, which are widely acknowledged to be far less threatening to the regime than has been the case in the Maghreb (the Revolutionary Guards, police, security services and the Basij are all under the control of hard line conservatives; two opposition leaders and contenders in the 2009 elections, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, have both been arrested; and demonstrations have been suppressed in a number of cities), renewed efforts could be made to engage Ahmadinejad. The prospects for a breakthrough political agreement with a single, albeit hard line (and strong) figure, who is able to broker agreement across factions will be far easier now than if there is a split in the political system or if the president becomes weakened. Reform through engaging the current administration probably represents the best chance of a peaceful change towards cooperation and partnership with the west, since the election of a reformist president with the full backing of Khamenei is now highly unlikely. Khatami experienced the consequences and political fallout of not securing the backing from conservative factions during his period in office. Rafsanjani, a former president, was recently ousted from his position as head of the Assembly of Experts to ensure that reform can no longer take place from within the system. [Khamenei's purging](#) of Iranian political institutions of any independent authority demonstrates to activists in the Green Revolution and all who support it, domestic and foreign, that they will not prevail.

Increasing engagement and dialogue may sound counter intuitive given the difficult relations with Iran, the current domestic backdrop, and the 'Arab Spring' climate engulfing the Middle East, but Iran is not an Arab state. Iran has experienced its



U.S. President Barack Obama and Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. (From L. to R.): Olivier Douliery / ABACA; Raheb Homavandi / Reuters / Corbis

revolution, war, and sanctions, and still manages to get by on its returns from oil. Therefore Iran is more stable than many other MENA states, giving it an edge in its ability to pursue foreign policies that promote its regional leadership. This includes the announcement that Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq will issue a joint "[Shamgen](#)" visa, as well as suggestions that Iran could facilitate regional integration through various means, including economic, and therefore refresh the assumptions upon which a new framework for regional security could rest.

4. By the same token of reassessing western foreign policies, Iran should be aware of the continuing positive engagement that China and Russia have with the U.S. and that its approach is not necessarily supported by states that are more concerned with their own national strategic interests. By fostering foreign relations which better reflect the interests of both parties, Iran could gradually moderate its position viz a viz the U.S., and more effectively use its strategic location to develop complimentary relationships with China, central Asian states, Iraq and India, based on commonalities such as energy supply and demand, as well as the facilitation of goods and technologies.

By re-engaging Iran, the U.S. could facilitate a normalisation in its relationship that moves beyond containment to a new era of cooperation based on mutual respect. By taking and sustaining this step, it could simultaneously rewrite a 30-year old dynamic and boost Iran's national security, encourage regional confidence building and integration (particularly with the GCC states), and undermine the effectiveness and attraction to terror networks. Surely, that is something that Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and the conservative factions, in the not quite post-revolutionary Iran, can say "yes" to.

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