

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/OB09Ak03.html

Khamenei plays hardball with Obama

By M K Bhadrakumar

2/9/2013

It was an extraordinary week in the politics of the Middle East and it ended appropriately by being rounded off with a reality check lest imaginations ran riot.

Three major happenings within one week would have to be taken as the inevitable confluence of a flow of developments and processes: the offer by the Syrian opposition of a bilateral dialogue with the Bashar al-Assad regime; the historic visit of an Iranian president to Egypt; and the public, unconditional offer by the United States of direct talks with Iran and the latter's ready acceptance of it.

Yet, they are interconnected. First, the Syrian kaleidoscope is dramatically shifting despite the continuing bloodbath. Unless the European countries drop their arms embargo on Syria (which expires on March 1 anyway) and decide to arm the rebels, the stalemate will continue.

The mood in Western capitals has shifted in the direction of caution and circumspection, given the specter that al-Qaeda affiliates are taking advantage. If anything, the hurricane of militant Islamism blowing through Mali only reinforces that concern and reluctance.

Suffice to say, what prompted the Islamist leader of the Syrian National Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, last weekend to show willingness to take part in direct talks with representatives of the Syrian regime - and pushed him into meeting with Russian and

Iranian foreign ministers - was as much the disarray within the Syrian opposition and his failure to form a credible "government-in-exile" as his acute awareness that the Western mood is now cautious about Syria.

To be sure, Iran played a signal role in the grim battle of nerves over Syria through the recent months. Strangely, it is Iran today, which is on the "right side of history", by urging dialogue and negotiations and democratic elections as holding the key to reform and change in Syria - or, for that matter, in Bahrain.

The shift in Syria has actually enabled Iran to cross over the Sunni-Shi'ite barriers that were tenaciously put up to isolate it. Thus, President Mahmud Ahmedinejad's historic visit to Egypt this week has a much bigger regional dimension to it than the restoration of the Iran-Egypt bilateral relationship. The trilateral meeting held between Ahmedinejad and his Egyptian and Turkish counterparts Mohammed Morsi and Abdullah Gul signified Iran's compelling relevance as an interlocutor rather than as an implacable adversary for the two major Sunni countries.

Interestingly, Morsi added, "Egypt's revolution is now experiencing conditions similar to those of Iran's Revolution and because Egypt does not have an opportunity for rapid progress like Iran, we believe that expansion of cooperation and ties with Iran is crucially important and necessary."

Needless to say, Iranian diplomacy has been optimal with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood-led regime in Cairo - neither fawning nor patronizing, or pushing and pressuring, but leaving things to the Brothers to decide the pace. Basic to this approach is the confidence in Tehran that the surge of Islamism in the Middle East through democratic process, no matter "Sunni Islamism", will ultimately work in favor of Iran's interests.

The cordial welcome extended by Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, head of Egypt's Al-Azhar, to Ahmedinejad and the strong likelihood of his visit to Tehran in a very near future also underscores the common desire to strengthen the affinities.

Simply put, the Syrian crisis has virtually receded from the Iran-Egypt field of play as a serious issue of discord. True, the Turkey-based Syrian National Council (SNC) continues to reject any negotiation with the Syrian regime, and the Muslim Brotherhood dominates the SNC. But this may also provide the window of opportunity for Turkey, Egypt and Iran to knock their heads together.

Besides, the SNC has no real influence over the rebel fighters, and Ankara feels exasperated at the overall drift of the Syrian crisis.

Thus, it was against a complex backdrop that US Vice President Joe Biden said in Munich last weekend that Washington is ready to hold direct talks with Iran over the country's nuclear energy program. Iran's immediate response was one of cautious optimism. Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi reacted: "I am optimistic. I feel this new

[US] administration is really this time seeking to at least divert from its previous traditional approach vis-a-vis my country."

However, by the next day, he had begun tempering the enthusiasm: "We looked at it positively. I think this is a good overture... But we will have to wait a little bit longer to see if their gesture is this time a real gesture... so that we will be making our decisions likewise."

Salehi subsequently explained, "A look at the past shows that whenever we have had talks with the Americans, including efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan, unfortunately the other side has failed to fulfill its obligations. You cannot use a threatening tone and say all options are on the table, on the one hand, [because] this is an apparent contradiction... Exerting pressure and [invitation to] talks are not compatible. If you have honest intentions, we can place serious negotiations on the agenda."

Obviously, Salehi spoke in two voices, and his retraction finally proved to be the "authentic" voice of Tehran. When the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei broke his silence on Thursday, he rejected the possibility of direct talks with the US. He said, "You [Americans] are pointing the gun at Iran and say either negotiate or we will shoot. The Iranian nation will not be frightened by the threats... Some naive people like the idea of negotiating with America [but] negotiations will not solve the problems. If some people want American rule to be established again in Iran, the nation will rise up to them."

One way of looking at Khamenei's harsh statement on Thursday is to put it in the immediate context of the announcement of further sanctions against Iran by Washington the previous day, which the US administration has explained as "a significant turning of the screw" that will "significantly increase the economic pressure on Iran".

But it does not fully explain the manifest harshness and the comprehensive rejection by Khamenei. Meanwhile, three factors are to be taken into account. First, Iran's domestic politics is hotting up and the dramatic eruption of public acrimony between Ahmedinejad and the Speaker of the Majlis Ali Larijani last weekend testifies to a rough period when Khamenei will have his hands full as the great helmsman.

Indeed, a lot of jockeying is going on as the presidential election slated for May draws closer. Khamenei could factor in that the talks with the US are best held after the elections. (By the way, this may also be Obama's preference.) Second, Khamenei has flagged by implication that Tehran expects some serious goodwill gesture on the part of the US before any talks take place. He has recalled that the US did not act in good faith in the past - such as when Iran helped out in the US's overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

A third factor is that Khamenei genuinely sees that Iran is on the "right side of history" as regards the regional upheaval in the Middle East, whereas the US's regional strategies are getting nowhere. In sum, whereas the US propaganda is that the Iran sanctions are "biting" and the regime in Iran feels besieged, it is in actuality a bizarre situation of

Washington believing its own propaganda while the ground realities are vastly different.

If the propaganda has us believe that the regime in Tehran is living in fear of a Tahrir-like revolution erupting in Iran, Khamenei's words show no such traces of fear or timidity. On the other hand, Khamenei would have carefully weighed Obama's capacity (or the limits to it) to bulldoze the Israeli lobby and to initiate a genuine normalization process with Iran.

When Richard Nixon worked on China in the early 1970s, he had the benefit of a broad consensus of opinion within the US political establishment. On the contrary, when it comes to Iran, pride and prejudice influence still rule the roost for most consequential Americans.

Khamenei's message to Obama is to get serious and think through what he really wants instead of lobbing a vague offer through Biden with no strings attached and no commitments underlying it. The Iranian leader who has continuously dealt with successive US administrations through the past 22 years simply threw the ball into Obama's court and will now wait and see how the latter kicks it around when he is in Israel next month.