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Oddly, Ahmadinejad may be the best man for Washington

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August 12, 2011 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, seems to have emerged triumphant from his power struggle with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While that might sound like good news for the United States, it isn't. Ahmadinejad is more open to improving relations with Washington than many might think. It is the supreme leader and Iran's unelected leadership who want to ensure that relations remain hostile.

There is no love lost between Ahmadinejad and the U.S. The president's frequent jabs at the "Great Satan," like his predictions of the imminent downfall of the "American empire," are unlikely to leave American policymakers nostalgic once he leaves office. But Ahmadinejad's positions often diverge from the deep-rooted, intense anti-Americanism of the Islamic Republic's clerical establishment.

The second non-cleric to become president of Iran, Ahmadinejad has gradually moved away from his extremist views, adopting progressive positions on many issues and in his selection of individuals to serve in key administrative posts. For example, it was his envoy, the National Security Agency chief Saeed Jalili, who negotiated an agreement on uranium exchange in 2009 with the U.S. and the other members of the "5 + 1 group" (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany), only to have it vetoed by Khamenei.

Consider also Ahmadinejad's closest adviser and chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. No fan of the clerical regime, Mashaei is a self-professed Iranian nationalist rather than an Islamic

revolutionist. He has favored more social and cultural freedom in Iran, and has repeatedly charged that Iran's clerical establishment has too much power. This amounts to treason in Iran. But the most controversial of Mashaei's views is his declared intention to restore relations with Washington.

Recognizing that a broad cross-section of Iranians desire improved relations with America, Mashaei has on several occasions expressed respect and admiration for the "great people" and "civilization" of the United States. Rejecting criticism from hard-line opponents, Mashaei has reaffirmed his belief that Iranians are friends of all peoples in the world, even Israelis. Also, and doubtless with Ahmadinejad blessing, he has attempted to convince Iranian expatriates to return and live in Iran (along with their considerable savings).

But Khamenei and his supporters among the Iranian autocracy – traditional conservatives, leaders of the Revolutionary Guards, and most Basijis, the volunteer militia estimated to number 3 million – reject Mashaei's views outright. As with the nuclear agreement, the supreme leader has proved an implacable opponent of rapprochement, rejecting any policy proposal that promises to resolve fundamental disagreements with the U.S.

Khamenei's rationale is simple. He calculates that the foundation on which his power rests will crumble if relations with the U.S. are restored. Enmity toward the world's superpower perpetuates a siege mentality domestically, while projecting to audiences abroad an image of Iran as the brave champion of Muslim pride and anti-imperialism. In this way the supreme leader promotes acceptance of the coercive tactics required to maintain his monopoly on power, while encouraging the Arab and Muslim masses, and even Western anti-imperialist intellectuals, in their preoccupation with "the enemy."

Hostility toward America allows the Islamic Republic to blame its problems on American policies. For example, the Iranian leadership will cite economic sanctions as the root cause of Iran's economic problems. Moreover, the image of the U.S. as the new "evil empire" casts suspicion on Iranian expatriates, the most significant link between the U.S. and Iran. The supreme leader prefers that they stay in California, because expatriate money and ideas would surely embolden his political opponents, strengthen Iran's independent middle class, and generally empower Iranian society at the expense of the state. For Khamenei, an isolated Iran remains a paradise for clerics. That is why he feels he must neutralize his president.

Ahmadinejad and Mashaei understand the benefit promoting better relations with the U.S. Like former Presidents Muhammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad and Mashaei were regaining popularity simply by giving voice to the idea of reconciliation. However, that was before internal tensions erupted. Should the Islamic regime crumble, they may rank as among the political survivors, so long as they symbolize change that the public endorses.

Ahmadinejad and Mashaei are Iran's potential Mikhail Gorbachevs. But if Khamenei succeeds in perpetuating the anti-American revolution he inherited from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, that outcome will be less certain. In a few years' time we may miss Ahmadinejad as we now miss Khatami.