

Obama's Iran Policy: Mutual Respect Matters

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Abstract

This article analyzes President Barack Obama's thematic use of "mutual respect" in his foreign policy and in his efforts to engage the Islamic Republic of Iran. President Obama began his presidency by proclaiming that America seeks "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." Towards the Islamic Republic of Iran, the President spoke of constructive diplomacy, a process "not advanced by threats," but an "engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." As will be shown, the ideal of "mutual respect" resonates authentically with Obama's personal background and worldview. The President believes that mutual respect matters, that it positively enhances American policies toward friends and adversaries alike. "Mutual respect" also strikes a responsive chord inside Iran because it embodies a time-honored value embedded deep in Iran's diplomatic culture, transcending personalities, governments, and factions. Yet Obama's mutual respect message has not been heard clearly in Iran, in part because of contradictions emanating from simultaneous expressions of pressures, sanctions, and time limits, words perceived in Iran as threatening and disrespectful. Despite such serious problems, this essay contends that "mutual respect" still matters, that it provides a constructive rail for bridging present chasms between America and Iran, a necessary pre-requisite to overcome counterproductive habits of "mutual disrespect."

Keywords: Obama, Iran, Diplomacy, Mutual Respect, Iran-US Relations

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The author wishes to thank the University of Virginia's R.K. Ramazani, the "Dean of Iran Foreign Policy Studies," for his comments on key issues raised within this paper. He is also grateful to the Center for Middle East Studies at Sweden's University of Lund, where a much earlier version of the ideas herein were presented and tested. Errors remaining are the responsibility of the author alone.

Introduction

Even as Barack Obama's phenomenal rise to become America's first African-American President catalyzed a cottage industry of instant books purporting to "explain Obama," the literature thus far gives little attention to a signature element within President Obama's foreign policy: "mutual respect." A dramatic change from the Bush Administration's "with us or against us" mantra, Obama's "mutual respect" theme has been boldly offered to all nations, including rivals and potential adversaries, most particularly to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This essay examines President Obama's use of the term "mutual respect" and demonstrates how it resonates with Obama's own life-themes. From the Iranian perspective, it will be shown why Iran deeply appreciates the principle of "mutual respect" and why Iran has been hindered from responding to Obama's message, due to contradicting pressures and threats. Despite serious problems, genuine mutual respect remains a necessary pre-requisite, a constructive rail for bridging present divides between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

US-Iran Context: "Mutual Satanization"

Since 1979, "mutual *dis*respect" has plagued relations between the US and Iran, leading close observers to characterize the regnant patterns as "mutual satanization" or "mutual demonization."¹ Barack Obama had just started college in 1979 amid the embassy crisis in Tehran, a drama which left most Americans with searing images of huge Iranian crowds, clad in black, fists raised, chanting "*Marg Bar Amrika!*" (Death to America). Few Americans then could comprehend why the Iranian revolutionaries deemed America, labeled as *Sheitan-e Bozorg* – or "Great Satan," to be responsible for so many of another land's ills. Since the revolution, Iran's grievance list against America includes the holding of Iranian assets,



perceived backing of Saddam Hussein in the “imposed war” against Iran, the tanker war, the downing of an Iranian civilian airliner, multiple rounds of punitive economic sanctions, and recurrent threats of military action and even regime change.

Likewise, on the American side, politicians and media moguls habitually attribute problems anywhere in the Middle East, if not the world, to the so-called “mad mullahs” in Iran. Propagandists find it quite expedient to label any would-be foe, whether Hizbullah, Hamas, narco-terrorists, even al-Qaeda, with the rhetorical short-hand, “pro-Iranian.” Into this brew, both sides have long accused the other of supporting terrorism – in general and also directed against one another - in one form or another.

Past efforts to overcome such mutual demonization made little progress. The first President George Bush, in his 1989 inaugural address, offered that “goodwill begets goodwill” when speaking of Iran. Likewise, Iran's president Mohammed Khatami sought to change the discourse with his UN initiative for a “dialogue among civilizations.” Yet cataclysmic events, like Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the attacks of 9/11, caused once promising diplomatic balls to get dropped. Even after 9/11, Iran cooperated in bringing down the Taliban in Afghanistan and facilitated compromises resulting in the Karzai government. But Iran's cooperation in this realm was “rewarded” when the second George Bush branded Iran a member of the “Axis of Evil,” setting in motion further distrust and recriminations. Most offensively to Iran, President Bush on July 12, 2002 scuttled dialogue with Iran's President Khatami when he condemned Iran's “unelected rulers” and appealed over their heads to the Iranian people, saying that “they will have no better friend” than America, if, in effect, they overthrew their government.⁽²⁾ From the Iranian vantage point, the Bush Iran policy had reduced to, “we'll respect you if you change your regime.”

Obama and Mutual Respect

Prior to becoming President, “mutual respect” did not figure in Obama's campaign themes, at least not directly.⁽³⁾ In the Democratic Party primary contests, Obama stood out for having opposed the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq, which Obama had criticized in 2002, as, “A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on



reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.”⁽⁴⁾ Obama, “the renegade candidate,” promised that if elected he would “change the culture” in which foreign policy decisions were made in Washington. On the campaign stump, Obama appeared to adhere to common American complaints about Iran, and was a known advocate of economic sanctions.⁽⁵⁾ Yet Obama bucked political tides by insisting that he would use “aggressive personal diplomacy” to talk directly, fearlessly, and without preconditions to anybody, especially to leaders of purported “rogue” nations such as Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea. Obama dismissed as “ridiculous” the arguments that talking to such countries would reward them, or become a “tool” of their propaganda. Obama countered that when Ronald Reagan was calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” he “constantly” spoke with them because he realized “we had the obligation to find areas where we can potentially move forward.”⁽⁶⁾

How Obama would speak to the world, with calls for mutual respect, became an early and frequent theme once he became President. In his inaugural address on January 20th, 2009, President Obama spoke of a future world where old hatreds and tribal lines pass, where “America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace,” a world where “our common humanity shall reveal itself.” To the Muslim world, Obama professed that America seeks “a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”⁽⁷⁾ In his first interview after taking office, President Obama told Arab satellite station Al Arabiya that he sought to communicate to the Arab and Muslim world that “Americans are not your enemy,” that “the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world,” that “significant progress” can be made because “we are ready to initiate a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest...” Obama emphasized that, “We can have legitimate disagreements but still be respectful.” There were limits: “I cannot respect terrorist organizations that would kill innocent civilians and we will hunt them down.” In the same interview, Obama spoke of the Iranian people as “a great people,” with a “great civilization,” and he emphasized a willingness “to talk to Iran, to express very clearly where our differences are, but where there are potential avenues for progress.”⁽⁸⁾

On 19 March 2009, in an address disseminated to Iran on the eve of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, the President declared his administration’s



commitment to “diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.” Recognizing that the road to better ties might be hindered by “those who insist that we be defined by our differences,” Obama invoked the Iranian poet Sa’adi to appeal to a common humanity: “The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence.”⁽⁹⁾

During the spring of 2009, the President repeatedly expounded upon his calls for “new beginnings” and “engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect” in major addresses in Prague,⁽¹⁰⁾ (April 5), Ankara,⁽¹¹⁾ (April 6), and Cairo⁽¹²⁾ (June 4). In the Prague speech, Obama remarked that, “To denounce or shrug off a call for cooperation is an easy but also a cowardly thing to do. That’s how wars begin. That’s where human progress ends.” In the Cairo address, the President interspersed quotes from Thomas Jefferson and “The Holy Quran” to call for “a sustained effort... to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.” The President was warmly applauded when he anchored “mutual respect” in The Golden Rule: “There’s one rule that lies at the heart of every religion -- that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” Transcending nations, races, and faiths, “it’s a “belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It’s a faith in other people.”

Obama’s Cairo remarks also attempted to reconcile “mutual respect” with “human rights” concerns. “No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other,” the President declared, even as he reiterated his commitment “to governments that reflect the will of the people.” For Obama, “These are not just American ideas; they are human rights.” Yet even as “we will support them everywhere,” Obama stated that “America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election.”

The “mutual respect” theme remained evident in President Obama’s foreign policy speeches during 2009 throughout the world. At the “Summit of the Americas” in Trinidad and Tobago, on April 17, Obama spoke of America not as



an “indispensable nation,” but as an equal among many: “There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values.”⁽¹³⁾ On July 11, in Accra, Ghana, Obama envisioned Africa partnering with America on behalf of the future we want for all of our children, “a partnership (that) must be grounded in mutual responsibility and mutual respect.”⁽¹⁴⁾ In Tokyo, Japan, on November 14th, the President asserted that he was pursuing “a new era of engagement with the world based on mutual interests and mutual respect.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Obama’s expression of “respect” to the Japanese emperor, bowing while shaking the Japanese emperor’s hand, while appreciated in Japan, was cited by Obama’s domestic detractors as “undignified” and “ugly.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Yet critics did not object when a few days later China’s President Hu with President Obama reiterated “a fundamental principle” that China and the US, “will continue to act in the spirit of equality, mutual respect, and a noninterference in each other’s internal affairs.”

Obama’s soaring rhetoric, not his actions, is widely believed to have led to his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. Ironically, his December 10 Nobel acceptance speech did not mention “mutual respect,” as it defended “just war” and principled war conduct.⁽¹⁷⁾ “Mutual respect” also seemed to figure less prominently in subsequent foreign policy speeches. For example, his December 2009 West Point speech calling for more US troops to Afghanistan barely mentioned “mutual respect,” and then narrowly in the context of partnership with Pakistan.⁽¹⁸⁾

The President may have been stung by withering domestic criticism, from neoconservative and liberal hawks especially, that his “mutual respect” theme exhibited weakness, naiveté, and dangerous “appeasement” towards those who “hate” or wish harm to America and its friends. In the wake of the internal disputes over Iran’s elections, Obama faced the rhetorical question of “how can America respect those who do not respect their own people?” Obama’s initial avoidance of taking sides, in part out of concern not to make matters worse, was lampooned by critics demanding that he “get on the side of history” and support Iran’s opposition.

Yet despite the criticism at home, “mutual respect” never left the President’s lexicon. It appears at several spots in the Administration’s May 2010 “National Security Strategy” Document.⁽¹⁹⁾ In his 31 August 2010 speech declaring the end of Iraq combat operations, Obama spoke of a “new approach” to a “long-term



partnership with Iraq -- one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect.”⁽²⁰⁾

As candidate and then as President, Obama has left it to pundits to discern if there is a coherent “Obama Doctrine.” If there is one, a few commentators recently have begun to discern the principle of “mutual respect” at its center.⁽²¹⁾ George Packer, for example, commends Obama for cleansing “the air of the arrogance and the folly of his predecessor,” for ending the “simplistic division of the world into good and evil. Instead of “with us or against us,” Packer identifies the key phrase in Obama’s foreign policy to be “mutual interest and mutual respect.” Roger Cohen similarly credits Obama for “subtly but persistently... talking down American exceptionalism in the name of mutual interests and mutual respect, two favorite phrases.”⁽²²⁾

Obama’s Roots and Mutual Respect

Obama’s mutual respect theme as President is well rooted in his life experiences, values, and worldview. It was not found in a diplomatic textbook, or created by a gifted speechwriter. While Ben Rhodes, Obama’s chief foreign policy speechwriter, gets credit for having a “great mind-meld” with Obama,⁽²³⁾ Rhodes has averred how “easy” it is to channel Obama’s voice from his books, citing instances where “whole passages” of Presidential speeches have been “lifted” from Obama’s writings.⁽²⁴⁾ That clue merits amplification.

The easiest source of Obama’s mutual respect emphasis can be traced to Hawaii, where Obama was born, where his black Kenyan father and white mother from Kansas met and married, where he attended the prestigious Punahau Academy for eight years. As Obama reflected in 1999, “Hawaii’s spirit of tolerance might not have been perfect or complete. But it was - and is - real. The opportunity that Hawaii offered - to experience a variety of cultures in a climate of mutual respect - became an integral part of my world view, and a basis for the values that I hold most dear.”⁽²⁵⁾

Obama has repeatedly cited that the greatest single influence shaping his values was his mother, Anne Dunham. Obama’s father left the family when he was two, for Harvard graduate studies and then back to Kenya. After his mother remarried, they lived in Indonesia for four years. There, Obama’s memoir recounts how his mother battled to prevent omnipresent pressures of poverty, corruption,



and insecurity from crushing his young spirit. For Obama to “grow into a human being,” she would say, “you’re going to need some values.” “My mother’s confidence in needlepoint virtues” such as honesty, fairness, straight talk and independent judgment “relied upon a belief... that rational, thoughtful people could shape their own destiny.”⁽²⁶⁾

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama reflects further that despite her “professed secularism” as a budding anthropologist, my mother was “the most spiritually awakened person I’ve ever known.” Without religious texts, “she worked mightily to instill in me the values that many Americans learn in Sunday school: honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work. She raged to poverty and injustice, and scorned those who are indifferent to both.”⁽²⁷⁾ After her premature death in 1995, Obama saluted her as the “single constant in my life, the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known. What is best in me, I owe to her.”⁽²⁸⁾

Yet the incorporation of her “needlepoint virtues” into Obama’s own life was hardly linear. His memoir recounts a painful interior struggle while coming of age, a “feverish” questioning of the circumstances of his blood, wondering if he had to choose between being white or black, to respect the one but not the other. Obama determined not to “sell out” his black identity, not to follow the course of the “half-breeds and the college-degreed,” those who avoided being “lumped in with the losers.”

But what did it mean to be black? Obama recalls a desperate nightmare, a foreboding that “being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat.” His intense readings in the black consciousness literature brought no solace, “no escape” from the anguish, self-doubt and exhaustion; “a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect.”

Obama’s period of bitter self-loathing, of thinking that as a black man he could not make a difference, changed when “black people he respected” helped him recognize that he had lost his way as a human, that fear had stunted his growth. No matter how painful one’s circumstance, there was no exemption “from being thoughtful or diligent or kind.” Being honest was not simply “a white thing.” Morality had no color. “Only a lack of imagination, a failure of nerve, had made me think that I had to choose...” between the courageous white, black, and tan grandmothers of his world. Able then to respect both halves of his being, Obama



determined to push back and endure, to “make music that wasn’t there before.”⁽²⁹⁾

Obama’s inward struggles forged yet another trait that foregrounds Obama’s emphasis on mutual respect, his belief in empathy. Obama again credits his mother’s influence: “She disdained any kind of cruelty or thoughtlessness or abuse of power, whether it expressed itself in the form of racial prejudice or bullying in the schoolyard or workers being underpaid.” She determined to instill in Obama the question, “how do you think that would make you feel?”⁽³⁰⁾

Obama internalized the meaning of empathy via his struggles with his white grandfather, Stanley Dunham, who helped raise him in Hawaii, and in his later efforts to comprehend his absent Kenyan father and grandfather. Amid Obama’s adolescent rebellion, Obama reveled in winning arguments with his grandfather. Yet Obama later considered “the struggles and disappointment in his life” and began to “appreciate his need to feel respected in his own home.” In time, Obama realized that abiding by his rules would only cost him a little, but to him it would mean a lot.⁽³¹⁾

Obama’s memoir also takes readers to Kenya, to ponder with him struggles of his flawed father and grandfather to reinvent themselves, to create new lives in unknown worlds. We learn of the humiliations endured by his grandfather, Onyango, while working as a cook and later resisting his British colonial masters.⁽³²⁾ His father, Barack Sr., succeeded in a way Onyango never could – making it to top American Universities. Yet after seeming to travel so far, “he discovered that he had not escaped after all.” Both died alone, in pain, fearful, enraged, trapped, broken by circumstances.

Grounded between their Kenyan graves, Obama was moved not to condemn, but to comprehend the ultimate source of their defeats. Finding “no shame” in their confusion, Obama laments they knew not that one could “never... re-create himself alone.” Transitioning to new worlds required letting go of rigidity, cruelty, and suspicions, not isolation nor silence, but reliance upon a traditional faith “that wasn’t new, that wasn’t black or white or Christian or Muslim, but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead – a faith in other people.”⁽³³⁾

Consistent with his personal values, Obama’s writings and speeches often lament an “empathy deficit” in society. Those in power would not tolerate failing



schools, not give themselves multimillion dollar bonuses, not launch “dumb wars” if they would put themselves in the shoes of those on the other end of their decisions. Yet empathy ought to be multidirectional, from both sides of the divides. “I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush’s eyes, no matter how much I may disagree with him. That’s what empathy does – it calls us all to task, ... the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor.”

While Obama’s known writings do not directly apply “empathy” to foreign policy, two Iran related passages suggest he might well recognize merit in doing so. They also suggest Obama had more familiarity with Iran than most American political figures coming into office. In his memoir, Obama recalls an encounter with an Iranian when he was a Columbia University political science student. The Iranian had challenged Obama to explain why slaves had not risen up in mass to end slavery. Obama countered with a plea for comparative empathy: “How could we judge other men until we had stood in their shoes?... Was the collaboration of some slaves any different than the silence of some Iranians who stood by and did nothing as SAVAK thugs murdered and tortured opponents of the Shah?”⁽³⁴⁾

A second indicator of Iran awareness appears in the foreign policy chapter of Obama’s *Audacity of Hope* campaign book. Therein, he criticizes how the “corrupting effects of fear” repeatedly caused American policymakers to view nationalist movements “through the lens of the Cold War.” As long as they opposed communism, America tolerated thugs and thieves as allies -- or worse. “Occasionally US covert operations would engineer the removal of democratically elected leaders in countries like Iran – with seismic repercussions that haunt us to this day.”⁽³⁵⁾

How “Mutual Respect” plays in Iran

Obama’s initial approach to mutual respect, to empathy, to talking without preconditions, was music to Iranian ears. More than just pleasant grace notes and felicities, a “language of mutual respect” conveys profound and tangible meanings for Iranians of all political stripes. As explained by the University of Virginia’s R.K. Ramazani, “respect” to Iranians means recognizing Iran’s “fierce sense of independence,” acknowledging Iran’s sense of its regional strategic importance, treating Iran with dignity and on the basis of equality, and demonstrating empathy



for Iran's past grievances with outside powers. Such sensitivities are rooted in Iran's pride in its millennial civilization and culture and its bitter experiences with foreign invasions, intrigue, bullying, domination, and "arrogance."⁽³⁶⁾ As such, words of threats, force, and pressures are quite at odds with the language of respect, as understood in Iran.

Mutual respect has remained a cardinal phrase in Iranian foreign policy statements since the revolution, routinely asserted as a core principle in Iran's approach to the world. The Leader of the Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini set the standard, that the Islamic Republic rejects relations between the "wolf and the sheep" in favor of a norm declaring that, "The foreign policy of Iran is based in mutual respect with all governments without discriminating among them."⁽³⁷⁾

The conviction cuts across all tendencies within Iran, regardless of leadership. Among countless examples, Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran's long-serving foreign minister (1981-1997) and advisor to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, noted in 2005 that Iran is, "eager to promote relations with all countries on the basis of mutual respect. We want to eliminate tension but we do not accept the imposition of anything upon us from abroad."⁽³⁸⁾ Likewise, then President Mohammad Khatami in 1999 lamented the "grave... wall of mistrust" between the US and Iran. "If negotiations are not based on mutual respect, they will never lead to results." Insisting that, "It is the right of every nation to stand by its principles and values, and to expect respect and dignity from others," Khatami envisioned misunderstandings overcome through "mutual respect and logic."⁽³⁹⁾ Upon Barack Obama's election in November 2008, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad congratulated him and advised him to replace past US policies that had "undermined respect" for the American people with policies that had "respect for the rights of human beings and nations."⁽⁴⁰⁾

Not surprisingly then, yet contrary to Western misreports, Obama's Nowruz message to Iran in 2009 with its focus on "mutual respect" catalyzed considerable positive interest inside Iran. While one prominent Tehran editor had previously cautioned that Obama's Inaugural use of the words "fair" and "mutual respect" had "no meaning in the lexicon of American governments,"⁽⁴¹⁾ Obama's Nowruz speech was widely contemplated as a significant departure from previous American approaches, for recognizing Iranian understandings of what respect entails.



By speaking to the Iranian nation as a whole, to both the government and people of Iran, Obama avoided past meddling attempts to drive wedges between them, favoring one faction over the other. Obama directly referred to the "Islamic Republic of Iran" by its formal name, thus acknowledging the fact of the revolution. Obama also explicitly indicated that negotiations will "not be advanced by threats," quite different from the Bush-era talk of "carrots and sticks" – an onerous rubric found offensive by Iranians.

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei devoted most of his own Nowruz message to respond to Obama, counseling Iranians to avoid "emotion" in favor of a logical examination if the "slogans of change" will result in changed actions.⁽⁴²⁾ Khamenei reviewed a litany of America's "lack of respect" for Iran since the revolution -- frozen assets, sanctions, and perceived US support of various "bandit" and "disintegrating" forces around Iran's periphery. For effect, the Leader referenced Regan-era Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's churlish barb about the only "nice and moderate Iranian" is a dead Iranian. Khamenei reminded Iranians that "again and again," American leaders "insulted this great and honorable nation, the nation whose only fault is to defend its identity and independence."

Given such mistrust born of bitter experience, Khamenei wondered if Obama's "velvet glove... masks a hidden iron fist." Yet the Leader left the door open to a positive conclusion: "We do not have any experience with the new US President and Government. We shall see and judge." He closed with this key test: "If you go on with the slogan of discussions and pressure, saying that you will negotiate with Iran and at the same time impose pressure; threatening while offering incentives, our nation does not like such words. One cannot talk to our nation in this manner." On the other hand, he offered: "You change, and we shall change our behavior as well."

An objective observer can see that Khamenei's concern proved prescient. Barely a month after Obama's Nowruz assertion that he sought an honest engagement with Iran, "grounded in mutual respect" and "not be advanced by threats," his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was "defending" Obama's initiative to Iran in a manner deeply puzzling to Iran. Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Clinton said in April 2009, "We actually believe that by following the diplomatic path we are on, we gain credibility and influence with a number of



nations who would have to participate in order to make the sanctions regime as tight and as crippling as we would want it to be.” As Clinton said in repeated forums, we don’t know if talks will work, but even if they fail, it’s good to have tried to engage, because then we will have greater international support for “crippling” Iran.⁽⁴³⁾

Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Iran’s former President and Chair of its Expediency Council, marveled at Clinton’s “strange” comments in a national sermon on April 24th. While appreciating President Obama’s “readiness to talk” and that his “tone” was “acceptable to a certain extent,” Rafsanjani lamented that Secretary Clinton’s statements sounded “like the rhetoric by Bush. She said that we share the need to hold talks but alongside this we are laying the groundwork for a crippling and painful set of sanctions.” Rafsanjani then invoked Ayatollah Khomeini – and implicitly the first George Bush -- to urge a different path: "Iran has always said since the days of the Imam that if America shows its good will and steps on the right path and enters talks through this good will, then Iran will have no difficulties with these talks. But this is not good will....” Clinton’s “strange” argument that diplomacy is an instrumental tool to legitimize “crippling sanctions,” rather than achieve agreement, was in Rafsanjani’s words, “not good will.” It is the “kind of language... not appropriate to the face that they are showing. They should not repeat this. The expectation that has been created inside Iran must not be frustrated.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Hopes were indeed raised high inside Iran; Obama’s words had touched off a new debate. Iran’s presidential competition during May 2009 included intense focus on foreign policy issues, including a debate over how best to talk to America. Three challengers criticized the incumbent Ahmadinejad’s style as too confrontational, that it had turned potential friends into adversaries. In his first major campaign speech, Ahmadinejad countered that his steadfast refusal to submit to any more “humiliation” explained why threats of "arrogance... have been removed." In short, he took credit for Obama: "Those who until yesterday wanted to force Iran into submission with a stick, today find themselves in need of Iran. Their rhetoric and tone has changed.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

Or had it? Over a year later, both sides still reference “mutual respect” and the need to talk, even as both attribute their absence to the other side’s lack of



change. Referring in part to questions about Iran's nuclear program, Obama reiterated on 1 October 2009 that, "We have made it clear that we will do our part to engage the Iranian government on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect, but our patience is not unlimited.... We are not interested in talking for the sake of talking. If Iran does not take steps in the near future to live up to its obligations, then," the President warned, "we are prepared to move towards increased pressure."⁽⁴⁶⁾ On the occasion of Nowruz in 2010, Obama again reiterated the offer of "engagement based on mutual interests and mutual respect." He said that he understood Iran's grievances about the past, what they were against. But he then claimed that, "For reasons known only to them, the leaders of Iran... "refused to tell us" what they are for.... Faced with an extended hand, Iran's leaders have shown only a clenched fist."⁽⁴⁷⁾

By late May 2010, Harvard's Stephen Walt characterized Obama's Iran policy as "sleepwalking," for having unimaginatively degenerated into "Bush-lite."⁽⁴⁸⁾ The rhetoric had somewhat softened but underlying tactics seemed all too familiar and likely to be as unfruitful as before. Apart from whether the US was in any way supporting the opposition inside Iran, sanctions were ratcheted up, military alliances with Iran's Arab neighbors bolstered, and even covert US special operations were reported for the region. Nefarious "hidden hands" seemed all too visible.

Sensitivities were further inflamed in April, when President Obama issued a new nuclear doctrine. While declaring that the US would not use nuclear weapons against any country which does not possess them, a remarkable change in itself, Obama excluded "outlier" countries deemed not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation "responsibilities."⁽⁴⁹⁾ In Iran, such language was a gift to skeptics, who heard not just the Bush era line that "all options are on the table," but now even nuclear weapons were in the mix. From an Iranian vantage point, candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign quip about "obliterating" Iran had become manifest.

Leader Khamenei continues to ask Obama the same question: "You use the slogan of change, but where is the evidence? What has changed?" On 18 August 2010, he complained about the "slogan of negotiations: They say constantly that they are ready to talk with Iran" while "imposing sanctions and issuing resolutions and military threats." The Leader reiterated that he is not against talks with the USA as a principle, and he did not, as many Western skeptics thought, contradict



Ahmadinejad's renewed willingness in early August to conduct "talks at the highest level...based on justice and mutual respect." The problem, according to Khamenei, is that "America does not enter the talks as an honest interlocutor... They want to bully." Bullying, as Obama well knows, at least from his writings, is the antithesis of "respect." Khamenei illustrated his point with a "story" of "the rascal who liked honey and went to a shop and asked how much was a jar of honey." After being told 100 tumans, the rascal squeezes the shopkeeper's hand hard, "and the poor shopkeeper got scared and said whatever you say." For Khamenei, "this is not a negotiation" and the Islamic Republic could not accept such a process. In short, the reason that Iran cannot accept the present American offer to negotiate remains, according to the Leader, because "talks under threat and pressure cannot be called talks."

Getting the Music Right

Experienced observers in both Iran and the US realize that talks remain vital. Few doubt that the two countries share important mutual interests, including Iraq, Afghanistan, the secure flow of oil, regional stability, stopping drug trafficking, terrorism, and al-Qaeda. Yet as tensions threaten to spiral into dangerous cycles of conflict, diplomatic minds recognize, as Iran's former Ambassador to France Sadegh Kharazi recently wrote, that "Negotiations are the only means to tackle the crisis between Iran and the West." He artfully added that talks "could be based on good will, mutual trust and respect for the logic of dialogue."⁽⁵⁰⁾ On the US side, Bush era Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns recently praised Obama's "long game" with Iran: "No U.S. administration since that of Jimmy Carter has had a sustained and serious discussion with the Iranian government. In the absence of any meaningful understanding of Iran's motivations and objectives, it is sensible for the U.S. to test the proposition that talks might possibly lead to a better outcome than war."⁽⁵¹⁾

Yet a disconnect remains. Burns presumes the "absence of any meaningful understanding of Iran's motivations and objectives," and then illustrates his own misunderstanding by repeating the widely held formula that "we reinforce the possible success of such talks by imposing an ever tightening set of sanctions against Iran..." President Obama may have adopted the same problematic calculus.



When Obama met in early August with a select group of reporters to declare that his Iran policy was making progress, he reportedly reasoned that military force was not yet needed towards Iran, because “sanctions were working.”⁽⁵²⁾ Therefore, the President presumes, we will have negotiations because pressure is bringing them to the table.

In his Administration's zeal to obtain greater international support for further sanctions, President Obama vowed to ensure that the “international message” to Iran was unified and unmistakable. Yet he was apparently tone deaf about how that message of pressure was actually received inside Iran. Obama might rationalize that “biting” Iran economically is better than military force, but he disregards how such pressures will be deemed by Iran as contradicting professions of respect. More likely, they are driving Iran away from the table, or at best, making it more difficult.

The key problem reduces to not comprehending what “mutual respect” means to Iran. Sanctions, pressures, and threats are inimical to the ideal of mutual respect -- a sure fire way to demonstrate that seemingly pleasing words to a Western ear will be rendered as a trick, a disrespectful deceit, to an Iranian ear.

President Obama can find a way forward via wisdom from Thomas Jefferson, whose memory he invoked on 13 August 2010. Obama credited Jefferson for arranging the first White House Iftar dinner, in December, 1805, for the first Muslim ambassador to the US, Suleiman Mellimelli of Tunis.⁽⁵³⁾ A key “founding father” of the United States,⁽⁵⁴⁾ Thomas Jefferson penned the American Declaration of Independence with the opening assertion that “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” required the revolutionaries to explain their aspirations “before a candid world.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ Obama's ideal of “mutual respect” comports with that same spirit, as it does with Jefferson's authorship of the principle of religious freedom.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Obama will find a practical lesson in the power of mutual respect by considering how Jefferson resolved the very dispute which prompted the Tunisian Ambassador's presence in Washington. The dispute centered on a neutral Tunisian cruiser impounded by the US Navy during the prior war with Tripoli.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Commodore John Rodgers on 1 August 1805 bluntly responded to calls for the ship's return by deploying 18 American warships across the Tunis harbor and giving Hamuda, the Bey of Tunis, “36 hours to declare if he wanted war or peace.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ After investigating the case and meeting the Tunisian ambassador, Jefferson composed an



extraordinary letter to Hamuda expressing his “great concern” that Rodgers had conducted himself “in a manner not consistent with the respect due to your Excellency’s character,” and assured him of America’s “firm persuasion that the interests of both Countries... can be permanently established only by the practice of justice, equality and mutual forbearance.” While defending the ship’s capture, Jefferson nonetheless replaced the decaying ship with “one more worthy,” as “a new proof of friendship.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ Jefferson’s magnanimous letter and gestures catalyzed a resolution of the dispute. Hamuda warmly thanked Jefferson for such “reasonableness and tact” and vowed future relations would be founded on “principles of entire and perfect reciprocity.”

Mutual respect mattered then; it matters now. Jefferson conveyed his message in an appropriate tone so that the Bey of Tunis could hear it.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The antithesis of “gunboat diplomacy,” Jefferson understood that explicit or implied threats essentially contradict the mutual respect norm that underpins true engagement and negotiations. Obama has it within him to appreciate that despite being the leader of a mighty country, there is “no shame” in genuine mutual respect. This innate noble personal virtue needs to crystallize into official governmental policy, to be pursued with honesty and in a steady and sustained manner. Great power can also be found in recognizing what respect means to perceived adversaries, in comprehending their grievances, in advancing common interests, in avoiding war, not by threatening force, but by reasoning, testing, and enduring – in having the courage to make new music where there is none, to have the audacity of mutual respect.

Notes

1. The phrase “mutual satanization” was first coined by R.K. Ramazani. “Mutual demonization” is comprehensively examined by William O. Beeman, *The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and Iran Demonize each Other* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005)
2. Glenn Kessler, “U.S. Halts Overtures To Iran’s Khatami,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 2002, p. A1
3. Obama’s major foreign policy campaign themes are evident in his essay, “Renewing American Leadership,” published in *Foreign Affairs* vol. 86, no. 4 (July-August, 2007), pp. 2-16. Therein he does speak of a “new partnership with the world.”
4. See, “Remarks of Illinois State Senator Barack Obama Against Going to War with Iraq,” delivered at the Chicago Federal Plaza, 2 October 2002, found at <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/warspeech.pdf>.
5. For example, see remarks delivered by Senator Obama at an AIPAC forum in Chicago on 2 March 2007. Found at http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/Barack_Obama_-_AIPAC_Policy_Forum_2007.pdf
6. For details on this debate, see Richard Wolffe, “*Renegade, The Making of a President*,” (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), pp. 242-44.
7. President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address, 21 January 2009, found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>.
8. “Obama tells Al Arabiya peace talks should resume,” 27 January 2009. Transcript at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65087.html#004>
9. Multi-lingual transcript and video available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz
10. Transcript of remarks at Hradcany Square, Prague, 5 April 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/
11. Transcript of speech to Turkish Parliament, 6 April 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-by-president-obama-to-the-turkish-parliament/
12. Transcript of speech at Cairo University, 4 June 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-



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13. Transcript of "Address to the Summit of the Americas," 17 April 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-the-Summit-of-the-Americas-Opening-Ceremony
14. Transcript of remarks to the Ghanaian Parliament, 11 July 2009, found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament>
15. Transcript of Tokyo remarks at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>
16. For a trenchant review of the flap, see Justin McCurry, "Obama's critics should be bowing their heads," *Guardian* (news blog) 18 November 2009 at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2009/nov/18/obama-japan-bow>
17. Full text of Nobel speech at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.
18. The West Point speech is at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>
19. The Obama 50-page National Security Strategy document is at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf
20. Recognizing that Americans cannot impose solutions for Iraqi political differences, Obama modestly offered that America can "provide support for the Iraqi people as both a friend and a partner." Text found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/31/remarks-president-address-nation-end-combat-operations-iraq>
21. David Ignatius may have been the first commentator to make the link. See his "Testing Obama's Doctrine," *Washington Post*, 8 October 2009, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/07/AR2009100703044.html>
22. George Packer, "Rights and Wrongs," *The New Yorker*, 17 May 2010, at: http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/05/17/100517taco_talk_packer, and Roger Cohen, "Obama's Post Iraq World," *New York Times*, 2 September 2010, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/03/opinion/03iht-edcohen.html>
23. Rhodes was introduced to Obama through former Congressman Lee Hamilton. Rhodes was the lead writer from the Iraq Study Group Commission, as chaired by Hamilton and former Secretary of State James Baker. For more on Rhodes, see Carol E. Lee, "Obama's Voice: Speechwriter Ben Rhodes," *Politico*, 18 May 2009, available on-line at: http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0509/22588_Page3.html
24. See Rhodes quote in Mara Liason, "In Oslo Speech, Obama Must Sidestep Landmines," *National Public Radio*, "All Things Considered," 9 December 2009, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121246503>
25. Barack Obama, "A Life's Calling to Public Service," *Punahou Bulletin*, (Fall 1999), pp. 28-29, available at: http://www.punahou.edu/uploaded/News_Content/Media/Pun_Bull_Obama_article.pdf. Related articles about "a kid called Barry" at Hawaii's Punahou School can be found at: <http://www.punahou.edu/page.cfm?p=1786>



26. In Indonesia, "a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship," Obama remembers his mother as "a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for new-deal, peace-corps, position-paper liberalism." Obama, *Dreams op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.
27. Obama, *Audacity op. cit.* p. 205.
28. From preface to later printings of Obama's *Dreams*. Available also as a recording at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lthyX-gScbY&feature=related>.
29. Drawn from Obama, *Dreams op. cit.*, pp. 67-105.
30. Obama, *Audacity op. cit.*, p. 66.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-69.
32. Obama has not as yet commented about a recent report his grandfather was severely tortured by the British during the Mau-Mau rebellion, as recounted by relatives to The Times last year – and assessed as plausible by scholars of the Kenyan rebellion. See Ben Macintyre and Paul Orogoh, "Beatings and abuse made Barack Obama's grandfather loathe the British," *The Times* 3 December 2008, at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article5276010.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>
33. Very similar to phrase deployed in Obama's Cairo speech. This passage has been drawn from Obama, *Dreams op. cit.* pp. 273-391.
34. *ibid.*, p. 107.
35. Obama, *Audacity, op. cit.*, p. 286.
36. R.K. Ramazani, "How to Speak Properly to Iran," *The Daily Progress*, 1 Feb. 2009. Available at: <http://www.payvand.com/news/09/feb/1036.html> For more on Ramazani, see Wm. Scott Harrop, R.K. Ramazani: His Life, Work, & Legacy," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 17.1 (April 2001), pp. 1-22, available at <http://www.cira-jira.com/Vol%20%2017.1%20%20harrop%20April%202001.pdf>
37. One of multiple foreign policy quotes on this theme attributed to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and archived at: http://www.rkhomeini.com/default.cfm?vm=imam_khomeini_Articles&cid=405&searchstr=undefined
38. Velayati was then running for President. Asked what principle would guide his foreign policy if elected, Velayati noted simply: "I will base my foreign policy on mutual respect among all countries." From Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereinafter FBIS) translation and report of Al-Jazeera satellite television broadcast, 13 March 2005. He withdrew his candidature once it was announced that former President Hashemi Rafsanjani had entered the race.
39. For interview transcript, see <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>
40. President Ahmadinejad's letter printed in the Washington Post, 6 November 2008, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/06/AR2008110603030_pf.html
41. From editorial by Hossein Shari'atmadari, "Do not become excited!" *Keyhan*, 17 February 2009, translation via BBC World Monitoring, 19 Feb. 2009.
42. Khamenei speech at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashad, 21 March 2009, as broadcast by



- Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network. Translation by BBC available here: <http://justworldnews.org/archives/003468.html> The text used here is from corrected translation provided by Open Source Center, 23 March 2009.
43. Clinton testimony before US House of Representative, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 22 April 2009, at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/04/122048.htm> See also her testimony the following day before the House Appropriations Committee, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/04/122098.htm>.
 44. Rafsanjani sermon broadcast on 24 April 2009 by Vision of the Islamic Republic Network, translation via OSC, 26 April 2009. It has been plausibly suggested that certain Clinton advisors, most notably Dennis Ross, consciously intended to insure that talking to Iran would not work, and thus intended to use language and tactics that would undermine them, all the while being able to obtain greater international support for new punitive measures. See Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "Have We Already Lost Iran?" *New York Times*, 23 May 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/opinion/24leverett.html>
 45. Speech carried by Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1 Friday, 22 May 2009, translation by Open Source Center.
 46. Remarks by the President on the P5+1 Regarding Iran," 1 October 2009, transcript at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-meeting-of-the-P5-plus-1-regarding-Iran/
 47. Transcript at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz>
 48. Stephen M. Walt, "Sleepwalking with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2010, at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/05/26/sleepwalking_with_iran
 49. David Sanger and Peter Baker, "Obama Limits When U.S. Would Use Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, 5 April 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/06/world/06arms.html>
 50. Seyyed Mohammad Sadegh Kharazi, "Negotiation the Only Solution," *Iranian Diplomacy*, 26 July 2010. At <http://irdiplomacy.ir/index.php?Lang=en&Page=21&TypeId=&ArticleId=8188&BranchId=44&Action=ArticleBodyView>
 51. R. Nicholas Burns, "The Strength of Obama's Long Game With Iran," *The Atlantic*, 19 August 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/08/the-strength-of-obamas-long-game-with-iran/61728/>
 52. As there is no official transcript of President's session with the select reporters, we are left with very different takes on his emphasis. Speculation has arisen that the President was speaking as much to US domestic audiences and to Israel, rather than to Iran, in hopes to undercut hawkish pressures for using force. See David Ignatius, "Obama offers Iran an opening on engagement," *Washington Post*, 5 August 2010 at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/04/AR2010080406238.html>, and "Barack Obama's Plan for Iran," *The Economist*, 4 August 2010. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/>



- lexington/2010/08/america_and_iran
53. Obama remarks on the occasion at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/13/remarks-president-iftar-dinner>. Jefferson changed the normal schedule of his White House dinner from mid-afternoon until dusk, as a show of respect to his diplomatic guest's faith and practice.
 54. Recognizing his profound influence, Christopher Hitchens refers to Jefferson as "Author of America" in book by the same title. (NY: Eminent Lives, 2005).
 55. The author's recent Jefferson Fellow studies at Monticello's International Center for Jefferson Studies focused on exactly this issue – works forthcoming. See also David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
 56. Jefferson authored the seminal Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom. He also owned a Koran. For more on both subjects, see Wm. Scott Harrop, "Jefferson Unafraid of Koran," *The Daily Progress*, 17 July 2007, longer version at <http://www.payvand.com/news/07/jan/1194.html>; and R.K. Ramazani and Robert Fatton, eds. *Religion, State, and Society: Jefferson's Wall of Separation in Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Palgrave, 2008).
 57. This section draws from Richard B. Parker (former US Ambassador to Algeria and Morocco), *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. 147-155.
 58. Contrary to a common claim that Rodgers' actions demonstrated that diplomacy works best when backed by force, Rodgers' ultimatum resolved nothing, and a local US consul urged him to suspend "hostile operations" until Jefferson's advice could be obtained. Hamuda too presented his complaints directly to Jefferson via his Ambassador.
 59. Jefferson closed with, "my prayers that God will have you, Great and Good Friend, in his holy keeping." The letter is reproduced in full in *ibid.*, pp. 239-41.
 60. Jefferson, it should be clarified, was not taking a "pacifistic" position. Jefferson at times did advocate the use of force to earn the young, vulnerable American nation "respect." In 1786, then Ambassador to France Jefferson wrote to fellow Ambassador John Adams in favor of building a stronger navy, to give the US the capacity to use force against the Barbary states, in part because "It will procure us respect in Europe, and respect is a safe-guard to interest." However, 20 years later, President Jefferson sees merit in not using the very force he helped create, recognizing that with the Bey of Tunis, it would be counterproductive. See letter to John Adams, 11 July 1786, in Julian P. Boyd, ed. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 123-25.