



OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS IN TEHERAN

By Professor Jean-Pierre Lehmann – June 2013

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The election of Hassan Rouhani as the new president of Iran on June 15 is good news, both for the people of Iran and for the world. For the West it provides an opportunity. Though it would not solve all of the world's problems, an Iran that is properly integrated into the global community would definitely be a very positive development, given the country's abundant human, cultural and natural resources. This is unlikely to be a smooth process, in light of the quite intense historical animosity and the turbulence in the Middle East. The gains in terms of both peace and prosperity, however, would be substantial. In order to seize rather than lose the opportunity, there are several steps the West, and especially the UK and US, needs to take.

1953 coup d'état

Partly because the West tends to suffer from (or wallow in?) historical amnesia, it has seemingly forgotten that Iran would most likely not be in its current political turmoil had the UK and US not staged a coup d'état that overthrew the democratically elected head of government, Mohammed Mossadegh, on 19 August 1953. In lieu of the popularly elected Mossadegh, the US and UK imposed the dictatorship of Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, who reigned and ruled, assisted by his notoriously brutal secret police known as SAVAK, until he was himself overthrown in the 1979 revolution.

While the regime that replaced the Shah is far from ideal, the US and UK should recognise that they bear a heavy responsibility for having aborted the democratic process in Iran and thus in good part caused the havoc that followed. The first step in order to seize the opportunity would be therefore for the heads of government of the US and UK, Barack Obama and David Cameron, to recognise their countries' past political intervention and express unconditional apologies to the Iranian people. With the 60th anniversary of the coup (19 August 2013) approaching, this would seem a highly opportune date to do so.

1980-88 Iraq-Iran War

Anyone who has visited Iran even recently cannot help but be reminded of how much the Iranian people suffered – including an estimated half-a-million deaths – during the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88. This was one of the bloodiest and longest wars in history. Though neither regime would stand out as a paragon of peace or virtue, the fact remains that it was Iraq that launched the attack. It was a horrible war in which the Iraqis made ample use of chemical weapons against not only Iranian soldiers, but also civilians. In the face of these heinous attacks, the West remained silent and looked elsewhere.

Initially the West remained neutral and participated in the usual UN ritual of calling for a cease-fire. This was so long as Iraq was winning. In 1982, however, the Iranians launched a major offensive and the tide seemed like it might turn. At that point then US President Ronald Reagan gave his unequivocal support to Baghdad and provided it with economic aid, intelligence and military equipment. In one of the many cruel ironies from the pages of the region's history, Reagan's special envoy to Saddam Hussein was none other than Donald Rumsfeld.

Thus while Saddam subsequently became the US *bête noire*, in the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war he was its hero! The even more cruel irony is that as George Bush and Tony Blair invaded Iraq in 2003 on the alleged grounds of it harbouring weapons of mass destruction, in fact twenty years earlier Baghdad used such weapons under the watch of Washington and London.

Such had been the support of the US and its allies for Iraq during the 1980-88 war that Saddam expected no opposition when he invaded Kuwait three years later in 1991. This was of course a gross miscalculation on his part.

The second step, therefore, is to recognise that if there is to be a rapprochement between the US and Iran, something the world should definitely wish for, a "truth and reconciliation commission" should be established between the two countries on the Iraq-Iran war. There is no doubt this will be very difficult and painful, but if the past is not addressed it will remain to haunt the future.

Iran and Israel's nuclear weapons

There is another "inconvenient truth" regarding US-Iran relations under the Shah on which light should also be shed. In 1957, four years after the overthrow of Mossadegh by the UK and the US, then President Dwight Eisenhower in the context of the "Atoms for Peace" programme signed an agreement with the Shah to provide know-how and equipment for Iran's "peaceful use" of atomic

energy. Iran's nuclear developments later intensified, leading in 1967 to the establishment of the Teheran Nuclear Research Centre (TNRC), which was supplied by the US with a five-megawatt nuclear research reactor fuelled by highly enriched uranium. This business is all very murky and hard facts are difficult to come by. However, what seems certain is that while overtly Teheran was pursuing a civilian nuclear programme, covertly it was engaged in research on nuclear weapons with the assistance of the US, Israel and South Africa. (South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons programme in 1989.)

Thus while Iran is under huge pressure on the basis of claims it is developing nuclear weapons, two things need to be put in context. One, the US (along with its allies) was at the origin of the Iranian nuclear programme. Second, Israel is known to have a nuclear weapons arsenal and remains a non-signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. While seeking to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon capability and trying to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation in the region generally, it is palpably not possible for one country, Israel, to be allowed to maintain the equivalent of nuclear power hegemony in the MENA region. The third step, therefore, would be to engage Israel to dismantle its nuclear weapons programme and sign the Treaty of Non-Proliferation. This would be a gigantic step for peace and prosperity in the Middle East and indeed the planet.

People & Business

A final remark. Everyone I know who has been to Iran has remarked on the hospitality and warmth of the people. This was certainly my experience. Iranians were hurt and humiliated when George Bush referred to them as constituting "an axis of evil". There are no doubt evil people in Iran, as there are everywhere. But to condemn a whole population in such a manner is unacceptable. Thus not an additional step, but an overriding effort should be made to establish multiple people-to-people programmes with Iranians on business, economic, scientific, social and cultural issues. Such an initiative could ideally be led and driven by the global business community with their Iranian interlocutors in seeking to incorporate the 75 million Iranians into the global market. With its well-educated people, big market, rich resources, and a substantial highly-qualified diaspora, the country has all the potential to generate its own "economic miracle" and emerge as the Persian Leopard!

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