

We're already talking to Tehran

By Brian T. Edwards

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Should the next U.S. president engage in direct talks with Iran? Barack Obama's suggestion that he would do that has been called naive (Hillary Clinton), appeasement (President Bush) and reckless (John McCain). The chattering class has cast the debate in terms of soft diplomacy (Obama) vs. the big-stick approach (everyone else). All these people are missing a fundamental point: We are already talking to Iran, loud and clear. We just aren't listening very well.

I happened to be in Iran, giving lectures at the University of Tehran on globalization, digital culture and American perceptions of the Muslim world, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made his infamous "Holocaust denial" speech in December 2005. On satellite TV—ubiquitous in Iran, despite the Western mantra that it is banned (it is) and therefore unavailable (it is not)—an Iranian colleague and I watched the local and international reaction. To my embarrassment, American channels such as CNN seemed unable to say much beyond the view that the Iranian president was insane.

In Iran, few people were discussing the speech. Everyone knew it was not directed at them, and they had something more pressing to worry about: crushing air pollution had closed schools and restricted traffic, and the gorgeous Alborz Mountains north of the city were invisible despite a cloudless sky. Students were rebellious, openly criticizing the government, asking for accountability.

But then the official American reaction to the speech, predictable and lock step, was to demonize Ahmadinejad as a terrorist. That provoked Iranians to line up behind him. This was easily foreseen, and may even have been Ahmadinejad's goal all along.

Nothing seems to distract Iranians from their political frustrations more than hearing Americans offer to help "liberate" them. They remember very well the events of 1953 (even those who were born later, the vast majority) when the United States "liberated" them from Mohammed Mossadegh, their democratically elected nationalist hero, and reinforced the oppressive Shah's power. Whenever American leaders speak "directly" to the Iranian people via TV broadcasts from the Oval Office or State of the Union addresses, it is understood in Tehran in this context of external American manipulation.

U.S. officials don't help matters when they deride Ahmadinejad's own direct communications, such as his long letter to President Bush in May 2006 or to the American people that November, shortly before I returned to Tehran to teach a seminar on American studies. Ahmadinejad's letter to Bush was rightly seen as an historic event in Tehran. Iranian moderates were hoping saner heads in both governments might prevail, but the State Department's response was mocking and ended the conversation. The same thing happened when Ahmadinejad, visiting Columbia University last September in another attempt at direct dialogue, got a derisive introduction from university president Lee Bollinger. To Iranians, the insult made Columbia look like an extension of the State Department.

Ahmadinejad has a weak mandate, but he was, in fact, elected, and that is what validates him in the eyes of most Iranians, not what U.S. politicians think of him. Iranian TV commentators can and do talk about the end of the president's term, parliamentary elections, shifts in domestic representation. Iranian democracy is very different from American democracy, but it is a fallacy to say that Iran is without a democratic process. It is not perfect: Its supreme leader serves a life term with the ability to make or break a president. But we delude ourselves if we forget what Iranians keep reminding me: In our presumably more perfect democracy, our Supreme Court (that word "supreme" again) decided the 2000 election from the security of its own lifetime tenure.

These opinions form fast in the new context of globalizing technology. The U.S. debate about direct engagement is a relic of the cold war, when Russians had to trade illicit American jazz records and listen on earphones to Voice of America broadcasts in order to get Western ideas. In the digital age, thanks to cell phones, text messaging, Skype, YouTube and satellite TV broadcasts from the "Tehrangeles" studios in Los Angeles, Iranians are well plugged in to American culture. Internet cafes are everywhere, and video conferencing puts American and Iranian students and faculty in routine conversation. As a university program director told me in Tehran, "Dialogue takes place between Iranians and Americans whether anyone likes it or not."

When politicians and commentators ignore this reality, they are putting international politics back into the 20th Century. Meanwhile, Iran and the rest of us are well into the 21st. Obama was right when he raised the idea of direct dialogue with Iran's elected leaders, because speaking directly to them will validate the Iranian democratic process itself. No president could do anything that would encourage Iranians more in feeling the power of their own will.

The debate over whether Obama should speak directly to Ahmadinejad is outmoded. Perhaps they could Skype each other.

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