

## Misreading Khamenei's Approach to the United States and Iran's Geopolitics

Written by Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett  
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Most of the Western media failed to report on [Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's annual, live \*Nowruz\* \(Persian New Year\) address yesterday in his hometown of Mashhad](#)

. Instead they took

[conventional snippets from his earlier pre-recorded message for state television](#)

. In doing so, the Western media have again missed important content and context regarding Khamenei's approach to dealing with the United States and Iran's geopolitics.

The critical point in Khamenei's live address this year was his reiteration of last year's ground-breaking offer: "We [the Islamic Republic] have no history with the new [U.S.] administration and president. We reserve our judgment. If you change, our conduct will change as well."

But, this year, Khamenei questioned Obama's determination to change the core substance of America's approach to the Islamic Republic and emphasized that Iran would not be swept up in Obama's emotional but, from Khamenei's perspective, substantively empty rhetoric of "change." Khamenei said:

I don't know who the decision makers in the U.S. are -- the President, Congress, others behind the scenes -- but what I do know is that Iran has acted on the basis of logic . . . we do not act emotionally with regard to the issues important to us. We make decisions on the basis of calculations, rather than emotions.

To be well understood, Khamenei's live *Nowruz* address this year needs to be read in conjunction with [his live \*Nowruz\* speech in Mashhad last year](#)

. Last year's address came on the heels of President

[Obama's attention-getting 2009](#)

[Nowruz](#)

[video message](#)

, which had been released just a couple of days before. In that video message, Obama had

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directed his remarks to "the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (actually referring to the country by its official name) and proclaimed that: "my administration is now committed 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." Even more importantly, Obama noted that "

**this process will not be advanced by threats.**

We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect."

Multiple Iranian sources, official and otherwise, have told us that Obama's words were positively received in Tehran. In fact, Obama's message directly prompted Khamenei's offer two days later in his 2009 Mashhad speech: "You change, and we shall change as well." On the day that Khamenei made this statement, we were attending a Middle East security conference in the region, at which one of the other participants was a former Iranian diplomat with considerable high-level experience in the Islamic Republic's policymaking circles, who had effectively stepped out of public life following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's initial election in 2005. When Flynt read, from his Blackberry, an English translation of Khamenei's pledge that if "you change, we will change as well," our Iranian colleague's eyes grew wide and he exclaimed, "This is already very positive!"

As [we have written previously](#) , during our recent trip to Tehran, our Iranian interlocutors underscored the significance of Khamenei's declaration that if "you change, we will change as well." In particular, our interlocutors emphasized that this statement represented a calculated and rapid response to Obama's 2009 *Nowruz* message from the Islamic Republic's highest level of authority. Some of our interlocutors pointed out that Khamenei's formulation -- which left it up to Obama to determine what "change" in American behavior or policy he was prepared to pursue -- was deliberately crafted to maximize Obama's room to maneuver.

Against this backdrop, Khamenei's speech in Mashhad yesterday clearly reveals the depth of Iranian disappointment with the course of U.S. policy since last March. More specifically, the speech conveyed considerable anger about perceived American support for the domestic opposition that emerged following the Islamic Republic's June 12, 2009 presidential election, continued U.S. involvement with violent separatist movements that continue to carry out terrorist attacks inside Iran, Obama's failure to break with a 30-year history of American efforts to isolate, press, and undermine the Islamic Republic, and what Khamenei sees as American deceit.

Referring to Obama's rhetoric about the Islamic Republic, Khamenei noted in his address

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yesterday that

the United States says, "Let's forget the past, we want to negotiate with Iran . . . we are extending our hand." What kind of hand? If it is an iron hand concealed in a velvet glove, that has no positive meaning for Iran. [The United States] sends greetings for a holiday but at the same time accuses Iranians of supporting terrorism and nuclear weapons, which is against the Koran. . . . They are saying, "Let's negotiate . . . build relations." They use the slogan of "change." Well, where is this change? What has changed? Make it clear to us -- what has changed?

Then, in contrast to his approach in last year's live Mashhad speech, Khamenei yesterday spelled out the kinds of changes that Iran needs to see in U.S. policy in order to believe that Obama is serious about wanting to put U.S.-Iranian relations on a more positive trajectory:

Has your hostility to the Iranian people changed? Where is the sign of that? Have you released the Iranian assets? Have you lifted the unjust sanctions? Have you stopped the mud-slinging, the accusations and the propaganda against this great nation and its leaders who rose from among the people? Have you stopped your unconditional defense of the Zionist regime? What has changed? They use the slogan of change, but in fact there is no evidence of change. . . . Change in words is not enough, not that we have even seen such a significant change in words so far. There should be real change. You say, "We want to change our policy. But we will change our tactics, not our goals." This is not real change. It is deceit. Real change should be evident in actions.

Clearly referencing Obama's statement last year that diplomacy between the United States and Iran "will not be advanced by threats," Khamenei said yesterday in Mashhad:

As long as the U.S. government continues its conduct, its actions and its policies against us, as it has done for the past 30 years, we will be the same people we have been in these 30 years. You say, "We will negotiate with Iran and exert pressure on it." This is a threat combined with enticement. Our people resents such talk. It is unacceptable to talk to our people like this.

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In closing, Khamenei seemed to say that, if America does not change the substance of its policies towards the Islamic Republic, Iran will go its own way: "If you do not change, our people has become, over the past 30 years, more resilient, stronger and more experienced." In this context, it is important to read Khamenei's lines in Mashhad yesterday about America's deteriorating strategic position:

The situation in which the U.S. government has found itself is detrimental to both the American people and its government. Today, you are hated throughout the world. . . . The reason is that you treat the world as if you were its guardians. You talk with arrogance and you want to impose your will on the world. You interfere in the affairs of other countries. You employ double standards in the world. . . . Stop your arrogant tone of speech and your condescending conduct. Stop your patronizing behavior. Don't interfere in the affairs of other countries.

These words reflect a growing perception among Iranian political and policymaking elites that the United States is a power in steep and accelerating decline. They are also almost certainly calculated to appeal to elites in rising, non-Western powers -- China, Russia, Brazil, India, and in the Arab world -- as well as Turkey, which have their own concerns about American arrogance and unilateralism, and assert strict definitions of sovereignty and non-interference in sovereign states' internal affairs as a defense against perceived U.S. double standards and inclination to meddle in the affairs of other countries.

In this context, [Obama's Nowruz message for this year](#), which came in a video released by the White House on March 20, seems willfully oblivious to what it would actually take for the United States to achieve a genuine realignment of U.S.-Iranian relations. Obama glosses over his failure to capitalize on the prospective opening created by his forward-leaning rhetoric about Iran that characterized the early months of his presidency with one of the oldest rhetorical tricks in the book -- blame the other guy. Noting that "Iran's leaders have sought their own legitimacy through hostility to America," Obama challenges those leaders -- "we know what you're against; now tell us what you're for." He then places the onus for the failure of U.S. engagement with Iran squarely on the shoulders of the Islamic Republic's leaders:

For reasons known only to them, the leaders of Iran have shown themselves unable to answer that question. You have refused good faith proposals from the international community. They have turned their backs on a pathway that would bring more opportunity to all Iranians, and allow a great civilization to take its rightful place in the community of nations. Faced with an extended hand, Iran's leaders have shown only a clenched fist.

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[Taking a page from President George W. Bush's playbook](#) , Obama continues by praising domestic political opposition in the Islamic Republic:

Last June, the world watched with admiration as Iranians sought to exercise their universal right to be heard. But tragically, the aspirations of the Iranian people were also met with a clenched fist, as people marching silently were beaten with batons, political prisoners were rounded up and abused, and false accusations were leveled against the United States and the West, and people everywhere were horrified by the video of a young woman killed in the street.

Obama concludes with a judgment that "over the course of the last year, it is the Iranian government that has chosen to isolate itself, and to choose a self-defeating focus on the past over a commitment to build a better future." In this rhetorical context, how can President Obama expect Tehran to take seriously his statement that "our offer of comprehensive diplomatic contacts and dialogue stands"? What is the substantive agenda for such a dialogue -- something that the Islamic Republic has explicitly expressed an interest in defining? How has President Obama modified the U.S. posture toward Iran to show that he is truly serious about strategic rapprochement? (Khamenei's remarks and our conversations with Iranian officials would suggest that Tehran has not observed any such modifications.)

In an asymmetric relationship such as that between the United States and the Islamic Republic, for the United States to insist that Tehran must show that it is "serious" about improved relations before Washington takes concrete steps of its own is a recipe for guaranteed diplomatic failure. If U.S. rapprochement with Iran is now a strategic imperative for America and its allies -- as we very strongly believe it is -- then Washington needs to be focused on what it will take to achieve rapprochement, not on artificial and self-defeating "tests" of Iranian seriousness. If Richard Nixon had taken the same approach to the People's Republic of China as Obama is taking to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States might still not have an embassy in Beijing.

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