

Behind the U.S.-Iran 'Breakthrough'

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the United States has had no relations with Iran, nor any direct talks, except within the context of the limited post-9/11 roundtable discussions in Europe, regarding Afghanistan. As the threat of a U.S. military attack on Iran loomed large on the horizon, forces in Europe, Russia, and China, raised their voices to reject this option, and to urge Washington to deal with its presumed adversary directly.

Calls for U.S. talks with Iran have mounted over the past four weeks, coming from the three European governments engaged in talks with Iran (Great Britain, France, and Germany); United Nations Security Council permanent members Russia and China; UN Secretary General Kofi Annan; International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Mohammad ElBaradei; a plethora of leading American foreign policy experts, including a score of former Clinton Administration officials (most vocally Madeleine Albright), Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft; and, last but not least, numerous Senators, including such leading Republican Senators as Chuck Hagel (Neb.) and Richard Lugar (Ind.).

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad intersected this process, with an unprecedented letter addressed directly to his counterpart in the White House on May 9. Although he did not explicitly request talks, the letter was universally understood as a gesture to that effect. A letter sent shortly thereafter by former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani, to *Time* magazine, outlined in eight points, how negotiations might proceed.

Iran's Overtures

These Iranian interventions made it clear to the "international community" that Tehran sought to prevent confrontation. Step by step, the Iranian leadership made known that it was willing to consider compromises. First, IAEA chief ElBaradei, after talks with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington, told the press: "The Iranians, as far as I know, agreed in principle that for a number of years [uranium]

enrichment should be part of an international consortium outside of Iran." He said that once negotiations were restarted, Iran would also apply the Non-Proliferation Treaty additional protocol again, which specifies rigorous inspections.

Iran's readiness to do this was signalled to ElBaradei by Ali Larijani, head of Iran's National Security Council, and chief nuclear negotiator. The idea of temporarily halting enrichment for a number of years, is a point made in the International Crisis Group's proposal for overcoming the crisis, a proposal Iranian circles had indicated agreement with. Larijani also told ElBaradei that Iran would be willing to engage in talks with the United States, as long as no strings were attached.

ElBaradei also repeated his own call for direct talks, as well as security guarantees by the United States for Iran. "At a certain point, if the negotiations were to move in the right direction, particularly when the discussion of security issues were to start, I would hope," he said, "that the United States will be able to join that."

A day later, Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said that an "easily attainable" resolution could be reached, if the United States wanted it. "We are prepared to engage in serious discussion in order to resolve this issue, and we have not made any



Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations, Mohammad Javad Zarif: "We are prepared to engage in serious discussion in order to resolve this issue. . . ." Here Zarif in a press conference at UN headquarters, March 29.

UN Photo/Mark Garten

exception with regard to the United States,” Zarif said. The United States must acknowledge Iran’s right to nuclear technology under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, he said. For its part, Iran would have to renounce nuclear weapons. This is in Iran’s best interests, he said, because “from a sober, strategic analysis, Iran’s security will be decreased by possession or pursuit of nuclear weapons, rather than increased.”

Zarif said that the United States would make more progress, if it were to “ban the pressure tactics, the intimidation tactics” and talk with Iran directly, rather than through the European Union or United Nations. “If they’re looking for solutions, why are they not talking to one side of the problem?” Zarif asked. “There is a resolution to this situation, and the resolution is easily attainable, provided you look for it.”

Zarif then went a step further, by announcing, a day later, that Iran “is willing to accept a cap on the level of enrichment.” He said: “This cap I think should be below 10, meaning reactor grade. Iran is prepared to put in place other measures to ensure fuel produced is not re-enriched and used for nuclear [weapons] purposes.”

U.S. and Egyptian sources have also pointed to several private “back channels” that were opened, at the initiative of Iran, to signal its willingness to talk. Former Iranian President Ali Rafsanjani, still one of the most powerful clerics in Iran, made several trips to Kuwait, where he used channels through the Royal Family to communicate with some top officials in the U.S. oil industry, suggesting that Iran would be open to granting oil and gas concessions to U.S. firms as part of a universal agreement.

Will Iran Accept Rice’s Offer?

Will Iran accept Rice’s offer for U.S. participation in multilateral talks? Although no final word has been spoken, there are good reasons to believe that it will accept. Immediately after Rice’s statement, an Iranian official told *EIR* that it was “very positive and useful,” something which “the Iranian side has been waiting for.” He stressed that the United States was in no position to start a new war in the region, a war no one wants, and that talks would provide the opportunity for “both sides to understand each other.”

The crisis in the region, this official said, required U.S.-Iranian cooperation, especially regarding Iraq: “Iran and the United States have common problems and common interests in the region; therefore they must cooperate.” Iran, he added, sought foreign investments, economic cooperation, and therefore, open relations with others. “The United States is very important in this,” he said. “There is no other country



UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said May 31 that the United States is prepared to join the European Union and Russia in direct talks with Iran. Here, Rice at a UN Security Council meeting in 2005.

like Iran in the region,” he said, pointing to its role as a regional power, and its special relations with Iraq and Afghanistan.

The first official statement by Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki on June 1 was positive, with reservations. “We support dialogue in a fair and unbiased atmosphere, but we will not talk about our undeniable and legitimate rights, because this is the right of our people according to international laws and treaties.” In other words: yes, but we will not suspend enrichment activities.

Mottaki went on to say, “We are ready to talk about common concerns and if the conditions are such in a way that we have outlined . . . we are ready to negotiate with all parties.”

The art of diplomacy will require that the stumbling block of enrichment—the glitch in Rice’s offer—be eliminated. A formula must be found whereby U.S. concerns about enrichment for military purposes are allayed, without violating Iran’s right, guaranteed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty and IAEA, to the technology. One possibility, hinted at by Larijani’s remarks to ElBaradei, might be a temporary suspension of enrichment, perhaps as means to get the talks moving. As Tim Guldemann, former Swiss Ambassador to Iran and a liaison for years between Iran and the United States, stressed in an interview with *EIR* (April 7, 2006), the Iranians are “bazaaris,” accustomed to a back-and-forth bargaining process. It will take time to reach a final breakthrough.

Certainly one convincing incentive for the Iranians, would be a strong signal that Cheney were on his way out. This is what LaRouche has committed his forces to achieving.