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Obama's Persian Tutorial

The president has to choose between the regime and the people in the streets.

By FOUAD AJAMI

President Barack Obama did not "lose" Iran. This is not a Jimmy Carter moment. But the foreign-policy education of America's 44th president has just begun. Hitherto, he had been cavalier about other lands, he had trusted in his own biography as a bridge to distant peoples, he had believed he could talk rogues and ideologues out of deeply held beliefs. His predecessor had drawn lines in the sand. He would look past them.

Thus a man who had been uneasy with his middle name (Hussein) during the presidential campaign would descend on Ankara and Cairo, inserting himself in a raging civil war over Islam itself. An Iranian theocratic regime had launched a bid for dominion in its region; Mr. Obama offered it an olive branch and waited for it to "unclench" its fist.

It was an odd, deeply conflicted message from Mr. Obama. He was at once a herald of change yet a practitioner of realpolitik. He would entice the crowds, yet assure the autocrats that the "diplomacy of freedom" that unsettled them during the presidency of George W. Bush is dead and buried. Grant the rulers in Tehran and Damascus their due: They were quick to take the measure of the new steward of American power. He had come to "engage" them. Gone was the hope of transforming these regimes or making them pay for their transgressions. The theocracy was said to be waiting on an American opening, and this new president would put an end to three decades of estrangement between the United States and Iran.

But in truth Iran had never wanted an opening to the U.S. For the length of three decades, the custodians of the theocracy have had precisely the level of enmity toward the U.S. they have wanted -- just enough to be an ideological glue for the regime but not enough to be a threat to their power. Iran's rulers have made their way in the world with relative ease. No White Army gathered to restore the dominion of the Pahlavis. The Cold War and oil bailed them out. So did the false hope that the revolution would mellow and make its peace with the world.

Mr. Obama may believe that his offer to Iran is a break with a hard-line American policy. But nothing could be further from the truth. In 1989, in his inaugural, George H.W. Bush extended an offer to Iran: "Good will begets good will," he said. A decade later, in a typically Clintonian spirit of penance and contrition, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright came forth with a full apology for America's role in the 1953 coup that ousted nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh.

Iran's rulers scoffed. They had inherited a world, and they were in no need of opening it to outsiders. They were able to fly under the radar. Selective, targeted deeds of terror, and oil income, enabled them to hold their regime intact. There is a Persian pride and a Persian solitude, and the impact of three decades of zeal and indoctrination. The drama of Barack Obama's election was not an affair of Iran. They had an election of their own to stage. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — a son of the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary order, a man from the brigades of the regime, austere and indifferent to outsiders, an Iranian Everyman with badly fitting clothes and white socks — was up for re-election.

The upper orders of his country loathed him and bristled under the system of controls that the mullahs and the military and the revolutionary brigades had put in place, but he had the power and the money and the organs of the

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state arrayed on his side. There was a discernible fault line in Iran. There were Iranians yearning for liberty, but we should not underestimate the power and the determination of those moved by the yearning for piety. Ahmadinejad's message of populism at home and defiance abroad, his assertion that the country's nuclear quest is a "closed file," settled and beyond discussion, have a resonance on Iranian soil. His challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi, a generation older, could not compete with him on that terrain.

On the ruins of the ancien régime, the Iranian revolutionaries, it has to be conceded, have built a formidable state. The men who emerged out of a cruel and bloody struggle over their country's identity and spoils are a tenacious, merciless breed. Their capacity for repression is fearsome. We must rein in the modernist conceit that the bloggers, and the force of Twitter and Facebook, could win in the streets against the squads of the regime. That fight would be an Iranian drama, all outsiders mere spectators.

That ambivalence at the heart of the Obama diplomacy about freedom has not served American policy well in this crisis. We had tried to "cheat" -- an opening to the regime with an obligatory wink to those who took to the streets appalled by their rulers' cynicism and utter disregard for their people's intelligence and common sense -- and we were caught at it. Mr. Obama's statement that "the difference between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as had been advertised" put on cruel display the administration's incoherence. For once, there was an acknowledgment by this young president of history's burden: "Either way, we were going to be dealing with an Iranian regime that has historically been hostile to the United States, that has caused some problems in the neighborhood and is pursuing nuclear weapons." No Wilsonianism on offer here.

Mr. Obama will have to acknowledge the "foreignness" of foreign lands. His breezy self-assurance has been put on notice. The Obama administration believed its own rhetoric that the pro-Western March 14 coalition in Lebanon had ridden Mr. Obama's coattails to an electoral victory. (It had given every indication that it expected similar vindication in Iran.)

But the claim about Lebanon was hollow and reflected little understanding of the forces at play in Lebanon's politics. That contest was settled by Lebanese rules, and by the push and pull of Saudi and Syrian and Iranian interests in Lebanon.

Mr. Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo did not reshape the Islamic landscape. I was in Saudi Arabia when Mr. Obama traveled to Riyadh and Cairo. The earth did not move, life went on as usual. There were countless people puzzled by the presumption of the entire exercise, an outsider walking into sacred matters of their faith. In Saudi Arabia, and in the Arabic commentaries of other lands, there was unease that so complicated an ideological and cultural terrain could be approached with such ease and haste.

Days into his presidency, it should be recalled, Mr. Obama had spoken of his desire to restore to America's relation with the Muslim world the respect and mutual interest that had existed 30 or 20 years earlier. It so happened that he was speaking, almost to the day, on the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution -- and that the time span he was referring to, his golden age, covered the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the American standoff with Libya, the fall of Beirut to the forces of terror, and the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Liberal opinion would have howled had this history been offered by George W. Bush, but Barack Obama was granted a waiver.

Little more than three decades ago, Jimmy Carter, another American president convinced that what had come before him could be annulled and wished away, called on the nation to shed its "inordinate fear of communism," and to put aside its concern with "traditional issues of war and peace" in favor of "new global issues of justice, equity and human rights." We had betrayed our principles in the course of the Cold War, he said, "fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is quenched with water." The Soviet answer to that brave, new world was the invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979.

Mr. Carter would try an atonement in the last year of his presidency. He would pose as a born-again hawk. It was too late in the hour for such redemption. It would take another standard-bearer, Ronald Reagan, to see that great struggle to victory.

Iran's ordeal and its ways shattered the Carter presidency. President Obama's Persian tutorial has just begun.

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