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Iran was seeking a way to reach out to the West

By Robin Wright

In the past week, there has been considerable discussion of whether the United States began arms sales to Iran as a way of freeing hostages or as a way of improving relations with "moderates" in the Tehran government.

The New York Times said that CIA Director William Casey had reportedly written a memo describing the initiative as primarily an arms-for-hostages swap. Once the arms and hostages were introduced — whether that was the initial motivation or not — the effort to establish relations with Iran was clearly doomed. Offering such an exchange, contrary to the policy the United States urged on its allies, jeopardized other interests. It also established a precedent that made negotiations with anything less than arms more difficult.

But an effort to establish relations was not occurring in a vacuum. Indeed, the United States joined the virtual scramble for influence in the most valuable geostrategic property in the Gulf comparatively late in the day.

A brief reconstruction indicates that the United States was not "duped" by the wily Persians, as cynics charge. The background actually demonstrates that the goal of rapprochement was quite realistic. And recent statements from leading mullahs in Tehran indicate that the rapprochement option may not be totally dead.

A significant change in Iran's vitriolic attitude became visible in mid-1984, a full year before the National Security Council's began formulating what amounted to a fundamental policy shift. The turning point was symbolized by Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati's stunning pronouncement to the Iranian Parliament. "The world is determined on the diplomatic stage," he said. "If we are not present, it will be determined without us."

After six years of self-enforced isolation, epitomized by the theocracy's rhetorical catch-all "Neither East nor West," the statement sparked wide interest both in and outside the region.

The speech coincided with a visit by West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the first important Western diplomat to visit Tehran since the 1979 revolution. After he left Tehran, Mr. Genscher confirmed diplomatic speculation that Iran had a "clear wish" to open up to the West again.

By the end of the year, President Ali Khamenei was publicly talking of a new "open-door foreign policy." And in a speech during Friday prayers at Tehran University, he even mentioned the "Great Satan" — "We are not enemies of the U.S. nation. We bear no hostility towards that geographic region and that land. We are hostile towards domineering policies."

This marked a major departure from earlier and angrier denunciations. His words were interpreted by analysts in the region as a signal in the subtle, occasionally even obtuse, tradition of Persian politicking. The Iranian president's representatives were reportedly among those who subsequently talked with the McFarlane team.

The change was a reflection of two developments. First, the revolution had begun to settle down. By this stage, the mullahs felt more secure after consolidating power by eliminating leftists and monarchists challenging their right to rule.

Second, and more crucial to Western interests, were the economic and military exigencies that had caught up with the inexperienced theocrats who had toppled the shah. Oil prices were plummeting while the costs of buying Western armaments for the Gulf war through costly middlemen were increasingly draining a crippled economy.

Thus, different personalities in the Tehran regime began to shift position — for different reasons. For some, pragmatic political convictions led them to want to end isolation, although not on terms that would make them surrogates of any nation. For others, deteriorating circumstances forced their hands.

In fact, despite the long record of the Iran regime's funding and aiding Islamic militants elsewhere in the region — notably those responsible for attacks on the U.S. facilities and citizens in Lebanon — there had previously been signs of pragmatism and "moderation."

Such signs included failing to close the Strait of Hormuz, the global chokepoint for Western oil supplies. The mullahs showed restraint in responding to Iraq's air strikes on tankers ferrying oil from Iran. And the Iranians did not retaliate when the Saudis, aided by U.S. AWACS, shot down one of their war planes.

By early 1985, the shift in Tehran was being explored or exploited by such disparate former rivals of Iran as Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union, as well as several others in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Both Riyadh and Moscow exchanged high-level diplomatic visits.

The Soviet Union was in many ways a more illogical partner in rapprochement than the United States, since Communism is atheistic, whereas the West is rich in religious traditions respected, at least in theory, by the Koran.

The Russians' invasion and seven-year occupation of Afghanistan, a Muslim nation that borders Iran, has also been a source of anxiety in Tehran. Moscow's sale of massive amounts of war material to Iraq has been another source of suspicion.

The 26 Soviet divisions deployed along the 1,200-mile Soviet-Iranian border have not lessened concern, especially in light of the Russians' prolonged stay in northern Iran after World War II. The first major crisis debated by the then-new U.N. Security Council in 1946 was Moscow's refusal to leave. Preventing Soviet expansionism has been as much a priority of the theocracy as it was of Iran's monarchy.

Still, there were enough common economic interests, such as shipping Iranian gas to Europe through the Soviet Union, to form a basis for talks between Tehran and Moscow. Those types of talks might have served as a useful model later for the NSC.

The final indication of Iran's new course was the voluntary intervention of Speaker of Parliament Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the TWA Flight 847 hostage ordeal. During a coincidental visit to Syria at the height of the crisis, he summoned Lebanon's Islamic militants to a meeting in Damascus.

Iran was sympathetic to their demand by the hostage-takers for the release of 766 Shiite and Palestinian prisoners taken from Lebanon, in violation of the Geneva convention on prisoners of war, to Israeli jails. But he made it clear that the Islamic republic did not favor another prolonged crisis over new American hostages. Again, Iran's motives came from a mixture of conviction and circumstances.

The Rafsanjani meeting set the scene for the eventual release on July 1, 1985, after 17 days in captivity, of the final 39 Americans. Iran's role was acknowledged, with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm, by the Reagan administration.

All of these events took place before the NSC scheme was developed. And each proved that at least some quarters in Tehran were indeed ready for further overtures from the West, including the United States.

The flaw in Washington's plan was to introduce arms and hostages. This anxious and short-sighted thinking did not lay a proper foundation for what should have been recognized as a long-term effort.

In light of the decades of anti-American sentiment among the mullahs who have ensured Iran will remain an Islamic republic even after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dies, rapprochement was clearly not going to happen overnight.

But the recent history of pragmatism should underline the necessity not to abandon the goal of gradually renewing relations with Iran, a goal that has been lost sight of during the acrimonious investigations in Washington.

The Reagan administration can revive the detente effort by making clear its goals to all interested parties and developing a multifaceted strategy that takes into account allies as well as broader U.S. interests.

If helping to end the Gulf war is a priority, then the United States can regain credibility by eliminating assistance that would contribute to its continuation or escalation. That applies equally to arms for Iran and military intelligence from satellites for Iraq.

If stability in the Gulf is a priority, then the United States can repair some of the damage done in the eyes of

Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, by bringing them into the process. They have more at stake than the United States in the nature of relations with the Islamic republic.

In dealing specifically with Tehran, the United States needs to develop alternative incentives, such as an economic package to aid reconstruction of the war-ravaged western provinces, to help rehabilitate the tens of thousands of wounded, and to rebuild damaged oil facilities.

This would have major appeal in light of Tehran's crippled economy. And politically it would be one way of demonstrating that the United States does not intend to overthrow the regime, an event which, because of the CIA's involvement in reinstalling the shah in 1953, many Iranians still genuinely fear.

Most Iranian theocrats will now recognize that additional arms sales are improbable. Yet their policy still appears to be oriented toward reassuming a place in the world community — a process in which the United States has major clout.

The second time around, the United States will have to deal more slowly. The 1979 revolution was in large part a reaction to the Westernization of Iran under the shah. Washington should take special care not to give the impression of trying again to direct Iran's policies or politicians. But remarks as recently as this past week by Speaker Rafsanjani indicate Iran is still interested in talking. The terms, involving arms, would be unacceptable to the United States now, but the fact remains that a channel appears to be open.

Full rapprochement, much less diplomatic relations, would probably not reach fruition during President Reagan's remaining two years. But diffusing the tension with the Islamic republic is, in the end, the only realistic way of ending this unconventional conflict.