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Obama and Iran, Considered



James J Zogby

During the 2008 election there was a television ad featuring a late night phone call on the White House hot line. "It's 3:00 am," the narrator said, "there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing, something is happening in the world...who do you want answering the phone?"

During the closing weeks of the election while campaigning for Barack Obama, I would refer to this ad, noting "I know who I want to answer the phone at 3:00 am, the one who will think before he speaks and who has the judgment to weigh consequences before he acts." I would also add that when Air Force One landed for the first time in the heart of the Arab world at 10:00 pm, I knew who I wanted to disembark from the plane. "Barack Obama. Not only because of what he would say, but because of the message his election would send to the Arab and Muslim worlds."

During the past few weeks, I was reminded of these observations both by President Obama's remarkable Cairo address, which no other President could have, or would have, given, and by his thoughtful response to the crisis in Iran.

As carefully crafted and smart as the President's messages have been, I was also reminded, in both instances, of the dangers posed by the ideological recklessness of his critics on the right. They attacked the President after Cairo, accusing him of "moral equivalency" (since he mentioned both the Israeli and the Palestinian narratives of suffering) and "weakening America," by apologizing for past mistakes (the 1953 coup in Iran, the Iraq war and the use of torture). They have also attacked Obama's handling of Iran. Led by the 2008 Republican nominee John McCain, these critics have been relentless, accusing the President of timidity and betraying American values.

Let's consider and compare how the President and his critics have responded to the still unfolding drama in Iran.

From the beginning, Obama expressed concern and some doubts about the Iranian election. When demonstrations broke out, followed by violence, the President expressed support for the right of freedom

of assembly and warned against violence. And when the violence continued, his language grew stronger, "The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, the beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days. I strongly condemn these unjust actions."

But, he has noted, it is not up to the United States to decide the Iranian election. And he has made clear that his role, as President, is to promote the national security interests of the US with whatever government sits in Tehran and that this requires an effort to engage Iran, if possible, in order to deter that government from developing nuclear weapons which pose a security threat to the entire region.

His critics, who rejected engagement from the outset, now want him to denounce the election and side with the opposition. Simplistically comparing the developments in Iran to the fall of the "Iron Curtain," his critics apparently believe that support from the US will lead to Iranian regime change.

There are two observations that must be made.

The political leaders and commentators speaking the loudest and urging the most reckless behavior have absolutely no clue what is actually happening in Iran. As was the case in Afghanistan and Iraq, everyone with a microphone and TV camera in front of them has now become an Iran expert. But, their badgering of the President is based more on an ideologically based fantasy of "spontaneous revolution," than on reality. It was this identical infantile disorder that led this same crew to believe that the overthrow of Sadaam's regime would "cleanse" Iraq and spontaneously bring about democracy, or that elections in Afghanistan would miraculously liberate women and usher in a liberal democracy in Kabul.

Because of their lack of understanding of what is taking place in Iran, they fail to recognize that egging on demonstrators might result in two undesirable outcomes. The demonstrators may feel emboldened, believing that the US will act on their behalf?which it is not able to do?leading to a tragic replay of the Basra uprising of 1991. Or the fact that the regime might use overt signs of US encouragement to stoke even deeper anti-American sentiment, legitimizing an even more ruthless effort to crush the demonstrators.

Given this, Obama's approach has been carefully calibrated to meet the changing circumstances. Clearly there is a dynamic at work in Iran spurred on by a popular internal discontent among some segments of Iranian society and possibly fueled by a division within the country's ruling elites. This must play itself out without external interference, which can only harm and not help the unfolding process.

In all of this, the US must not be seen as an actor involved in the conflict (despite the efforts by hardliners here and there to make it so). Ignoring the goading of his critics, this is the position President Obama has maintained. What he knows is that, at the end of the day, the US will still have to deal with whatever government is in Tehran, and will still be faced with the nuclear challenge and the exporting of violence that makes this government a problem in the broader region.

That is why I remain thankful that Barack Obama won on November 4, 2008.

*Published in the Yemen's Yemen Observer on July 4. Dr. James J. Zogby is the founder and president of the Arab American Institute (AAI), a Washington, a D.C.-based organization which serves as the political and policy research arm of the Arab American community.