

The Iraq dimension of US-Iran relations

History and logic, argues *Chibli Mallat*, suggest a basis for rapprochement between America and Khatami

If there is a window of opportunity for beginning normalisation between Iran and the world upon the election of Muhammad Khatami, it is slight. Although the worldview of the new president is different from most other leaders in the Islamic Republic, the faultlines inside Iran and his room for manoeuvre are limited.

For the window of opportunity to widen, Khatami must prove true to his word in enhancing the rule of law and the constitution, and he can be helped in that by a reshuffling of the US dual containment conditions, with the "forgotten" condition of human rights being brought to the top.

And yet, even a major reshuffle would not be decisive. It will take time before anyone in the Middle East starts believing that the US cares for human rights more than oil; and, in any case, human rights improvement inside Iran will not happen overnight.

What Khatami needs is a major success in the region, and there is no potential major success for Iran which would not be at the same time a major defeat for America – except in one country: Iraq.

Only in Iraq can an objective convergence between the US and Iran take place. Khatami, as well as other leaders in the Islamic republic, will support a rapprochement with Washington to secure what Khumaini's continuation of the Iran-Iraq war beyond the summer of 1982 did not secure: the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

A brief recap of this crucial period is necessary. Back in the spring of 1982, the 18-month-old invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein's troops had completely backfired. Amidst rising rumours of assassination attempts and internal collapse, the Iraqi army was on the retreat on all fronts, and Iran had regained most of its territory. A choice faced the Iranian leadership: would they stop at the border, or carry on in the direction of Baghdad and uproot the Baath? The temptation of an Iranian-style Islamic Republic of Iraq carried the day. War continued.

This was also when Saddam Hussein engi-

neered an escape by encouraging Ariel Sharon in his grand designs in Lebanon, and provided Sharon with the excuse he needed with the attempt to kill Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador to Britain.

The tactic worked, and the pressure on Saddam Hussein's Iranian front let up. The Iran-Iraq war dragged on another five years, during which all the Arab countries, except Syria, increasingly backed the Iraqi ruler for nationalistic or expedient reasons.

America also threw its lot behind the Iraqi leader, but this took some time. It happened only after a major scandal in Washington in the shape of Irangate. Irangate was a disaster for US domestic policy, as it showed a small group of conspirators headed by an obscure officer by the name of Oliver North lie to Congress over a double-dealing policy which flew in the face of American officials standing up to Iran over the hostage crisis.

The scandal destroyed the group behind the conspiracy – mainly North, Robert McFarlane, John Poindexter and Howard Teicher, all at the National Security Council in one capacity or the other – beyond retrieve by the revelation that the moneys used to facilitate the deal were part of a triangular operation involving the Contras in Nicaragua, in clear breach of law as laid down by Congress.

But what was the aborted deal between the US administration and the Iranian leadership about? In the murky negotiations of 1984-1986, the Americans offered no less than their readiness to see Saddam Hussein out of power: this is what ensured the support of the whole Iranian leadership behind the deal, and resulted in the visit of McFarlane with the legendary cake and key to Tehran. One can imagine the change in the course of history, had the arrangements not been uncovered by the leak to the *Shira* magazine in Beirut in November 1986.

Many barrels of ink have been spilled over Irangate and its consequences. For our purposes, two lessons matter: the first is that the more open a policy, the more fruitful. This is as true then as it now. The second is that it is

time to revive this policy, in open form, to operate a rapprochement between Iran and the West. In other words, there is one, major element which can bring president Khatami and president Clinton together: the organised departure of Saddam Hussein.

Let us follow further the two lessons of Irangate. One, there is nothing to hide in the Middle East: *ma fi shi khalf al-sitar* ('there is nothing behind a curtain') – as said Ambassador Richard Murphy in a lecture at Oxford after his retirement from active policy where he was on the receiving end of North's machinations. If one believes in good policy, it should be an open one.

The declarations of Madeleine Albright in Georgetown on March 26 – to the effect that the administration will not be wobbly towards Saddam and that it is now ready to talk to a successor in Baghdad – are a step forward. No one should have any doubt that Saddam Hussein is "irredeemable" for US policy.

The other lesson from the failure of Irangate, is that it was good and wise policy to rid the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein, who brought unmitigated disaster on them when he invaded Iran, and carried on his worldwide mischief by violent forays in Lebanon, Kuwait and elsewhere.

But if this is good policy, and if good policy is open policy, how is it possible, in the present atmosphere of mutual distrust, to re-focus the Middle East on a common American-Iranian – and one should say also Arab – denominator, which is to bring back Iraq into its natural fold by freeing it from Saddam Hussein and a quarter of a century accumulation of domestic and regional brutality at his hands? How can a common goal be agreed between two distrustful parties?

In the past few days, great hopes across the world have accompanied the possibility of Pol Pot's trial for his genocide. It is to the credit of Madeleine Albright, at the UN and now in the state department, to have consistently pushed international criminal fora on the agenda of world diplomacy, despite the difficult circum-

stances of mass murder in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Cambodia.

Iraq is another strong contender. It is worth recalling that Ceasefire Security Council Resolution 598 (20 July 1987), which brought the Iran-Iraq war to an end, included, in its clause 6, "entrusting an impartial body with inquiring into responsibility for the conflict and to report to the Security Council as soon as possible." The process took four years, and on 9 December 1991, then UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, concluded that Iraq's "attack of 22 September 1980 against Iran ... cannot be justified under the Charter of the United Nations, any recognised rules and principles of international law or any principles of international morality and entails the responsibility for the conflict."

This dramatic breach of international law was taken up, among other violations, "by various Iraqi opposition groups and non-governmental organisations to document Iraqi war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law. This effort, known as INDICT, seeks ultimately to ensure that Saddam Hussein and other members of his regime are brought to justice before an international tribunal. We are in touch with organisers of INDICT and other parties to discuss the best means to move forward..."

This last quotation is from President Clinton's message to Congressional leaders on 8 May 1997.

One of "the best means to move forward" is for America to enlist Iranian support for bringing Saddam Hussein to trial. This is how President Khatami and the whole leadership of Iran can start on the course of rapprochement with the West. As an open policy, it does not matter who moves first: Iran or the United States. Discussions over removing Saddam were, after all, blessed during Irangate by the late Ruhollah Khumaini.