



Obama Administration Tactics On Iran

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Obama Administration Shifts Its Tactics On Iran

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When President Obama took office just over a year ago, he embarked on what many people believed — and hoped — was a new era for U.S.-Iran relations. Obama wanted to engage with the Islamic republic to help break the impasse created by Iran's suspected nuclear program.

But analysts say his efforts were rebuffed. And earlier this week, the U.S. Treasury Department announced sanctions on companies run by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Flynt Leverett, a senior research fellow at the New America Foundation, says Obama may have had some forward-leaning impulses when he took office, "but it seems they were just that — impulses," he says.

Leverett says the new sanctions show the administration did not have a fully thought-out strategy about how to realign relations with Iran.

"They've essentially fallen back into the same-old, same-old, and it's hard to say beyond some specimens of nicer rhetoric, what, in substance, is really different about their policy from what George W. Bush's policy was by the time he left office," Leverett says.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, says the administration now has few options but to slap sanctions on the Iranian regime. However, Gerecht says, the administration should change how it frames those sanctions, focusing them on human rights violations rather than on Iran's nuclear program.

"I think it's important that any sanctions implemented be clearly labeled and understood by the Iranian people as being sanctions on their behalf," Gerecht says.

He adds that if the Obama administration labels sanctions as in support of Iranian democracy or free elections, there would likely be significant support inside the country for the measures, even if they end up hurting people economically.

The concern over human rights abuses is gaining traction. Over the past eight months, there have been mass arrests and intimidation of anti-government protesters and their families, and at least two executions by the Iranian authorities.

The U.S. and European Union issued a statement earlier this week calling on the Iranian government to fulfill its human rights obligations. Sens. John McCain and Joe Lieberman also introduced the Iran Human Rights Sanctions Act, which would identify and impose sanctions on human rights abusers in Iran.

Gerecht says the administration should make it clear the sanctions are not aimed at harming the Iranian people. Still, Gerecht says, this may be a hard sell — because everyone knows at the end of the day it's the nuclear program that concerns the U.S. the most.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, agrees that the nuclear issue is of vital interest to the U.S. But he says it shouldn't overshadow every other issue between the two countries.

"If there will ever be a normal relationship between the United States and the government of Iran, a number of those other issues will have to be addressed at some point," he says. "The main issue, however, will be

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addressed at some point, he says. The main issue I suspect will be Iran's overall role in the region. We need to get a better feel about Iran's ambitions, what kind of role it wants to play."

Carpenter says for three decades the U.S. has been trying to isolate Iran with no real success.

Genevieve Abdo, an Iran analyst with The Century Foundation and editor of insideiran.org, says she is buoyed by recent talk of other options for dealing with Iran, such as empowering the opposition there.

Abdo says one way to do this would be to provide technology to prevent the Iranian authorities from cutting Internet and mobile phone services in an effort to cripple protest organizers.

"So that whenever the regime blocks the Internet and Facebook and Iranians' access to the Internet, there can be technology to overcome this," she says. That way, Abdo says, people inside the country can communicate with one another and continue to organize protests, and they can also communicate with Iranians helping the opposition who live outside the country.

Abdo says if the U.S. decides to help the opposition in Iran, it has to be careful to avoid any perception of outside interference. The Iranian government has long alleged that the U.S. and other Western governments are behind the opposition movement.

"So obviously, if the United States publicly comes out and says, 'We support the efforts of the opposition,' the regime could definitely use this against the movement," she says. Copyright 2010 National Public Radio

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