Opinion

Iran: remember Jekyll as well as Hyde

Amir Taheri

In his first foreign policy move, President Obama has called on the Islamic Republic of Iran to "unravel its fist" and reach for an "extended hand of friendship" from Washington. Tehran's answer will come this week as millions of marchers, their fists clenched tighter than ever, mark the 30th anniversary of the Khomeini revolution with shouts of "Death to America" and the burning of the US embassy flag.

Mr Obama is not the first US president to reach out to Iran. Thirty years ago, Jimmy Carter sent a handwritten letter to Ayatollah Khomeini welcoming the mujahidin seizure of power and promising support. The answer came in the form of the raid on the US embassy in Tehran and the 44-day hostage ordeal of American diplomats.

Since then, every US president, including George W. Bush in his second term, has tried to placate the mullahs, with no success. The reason is that since 1979, Iran has suffered from a kind of Jekyll and Hyde split personality, in which it has been torn between its reality as a nation state and its dream as the vehicle for a universal messianic revolution.

As a nation state, Iran has no objective reason to be an enemy of the United States, a fact reflected in the unabiding popularity that America enjoy abroad among Iranians. As a revolutionary force, however, Iran must regard the US as its No. 1 enemy because the US is the only power capable of resisting the global ambitions of the Khomeinists.

American attempts at engaging Iran failed because they ignored the dual nature of Iranian reality. In suggesting dialogue, US leaders never decided which of the two Ians they intended to deal with.

Iran's split personality can be seen in all aspects of its life. It has an elected president of the republic, whose tenure is limited to two consecutive four-year terms. But there is no elected "supreme guide," in place for life with unlimited power and answerable to no one.

There is an elected parliament whose every decision could be cancelled by an appointed body of mullahs acting as a star chamber.

Iran today also has two legal systems. One, based on the Napoleonic code, and inherited from the constitutional revolution of 1906, is enforced by ordinary courts operating much like their counterparts in Europe. The other consists of Shariah courts, operated by mullahs with little or no regard for the most elementary principles of justice.

The military is also divided. There is a regular army with a long history of professionalism and a strict tradition of steering clear of politics. There is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a parallel army resembling a Mafia-style organization deeply engaged in business and politics.

Beyond state structure, the duality of Iran is reflected throughout society. Iranians pay for and modernize in public, especially when TV cameras are present, but they also beat most other nations in partying in private. Few go to the mosque, except for political demobilizations, but millions flock to tourist sites throughout the land.

While the official discourse is dominated by arcane Islamic themes and a mythology of martyrdom, today's Persian literature and art are almost entirely secularized, not to say Westernized. (A glimpse of this can be seen at an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London.)

Official Iran is not any kinder to Iranians than the mosques but millions flock to tourist sites.

Islam than the West. For the first time in almost 14 centuries, Islam is being ripped out, its place taken by an erstwhile faith based on the cult of the "supreme guide," the return of the "hidden Imam," and dreams of world conquest.

As a nation, Iran accepts the modern world and looks to repeat it as a founding member. As a revolutionary force, Iran sees itself as a "Crossover-Zion" invention and dreams of engulfing it in the name of Khomeinism. As the embodiment of the Khomeinist revolution, the country is a threat to regional stability and world peace. Obsessed by the concept of "exporting the revolution," the Khomeinist ruling elite devotes vast resources to undermining the established order in neighboring countries. Its aggression does not come in the form of tanks crossing international borders and jets bombing enemy cities. That is how a nation state would behave if it were at war. The Islamic Republic uses subversion, low-intensity conflict and terrorism to export its vicious ideology.

The Islamic Republic is about repression, terrorism, the holding of hostages, subversion, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and megalomaniac madness. The change of behaviour that President Obama has called for could only come when Iran realizes itself as a normal nation state bound by international law and custom.

In the meantime, a credible strategy for dealing with Iran should take its split personality into account. Where Iran behaves as a normal nation state — fighting drug trafficking, protecting the environment in the Caspian Sea and Gulf — it should be encouraged. Where it behaves as the vehicle for revolution — sponsoring terrorism, violating human rights, pursuing weapons of mass destruction — it should be resisted, contained and, when necessary, given a taste of its own medicine.

Like other nations with similar experiences, Iran will eventually abandon its revolution and return as a normal nation state. The United States and its allies should focus on helping the process by refusing to legitimize the Mr Hyde aspect of Iran's split personality in the name of realpolitik.

Amir Taheri's new book is The Persian Mullahs Under the Khomeinist Revolution (Encounter Books).

In my view

Paul O'Driscoll

The flower trade is no bed of roses