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Message to Iran Shows Strategy Shift
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When President Barack Obama sent a video message to Iran marking the Persian New Year last week, it ran to just 556 words. But that brief message spoke volumes about the strategy that lies behind his oft-repeated pledge to reach out to Tehran.

The odds of success here may not be great -- the quick dismissal of the overture by Iran's supreme clerical leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, underscored that -- but the overture will be far more than a simple repeat of past American attempts at outreach to Iran. The audience Mr. Obama is seeking to reach, the aim of the outreach, the content of his message and the plans for a follow-up all will be different from past approaches spanning administrations of both parties.

Consider these differences in turn:

Audience. When the Bush administration reached out to Iran, it sought consciously to go around its leaders and speak directly to the Iranian people, hoping to drive a wedge between the two.

Mr. Obama's message, delivered via the Internet, was consciously aimed at government leaders as well as the Iranian people. At the outset he said: "I would like to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Later, he was even more explicit: "So in this season of new beginnings I would like to speak clearly to Iran's leaders. We have serious differences that have grown over time. My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community."

Beyond Iran's people and leaders, there was another audience: America's allies. The Obama administration knows that if it wants their help later in cracking down on Iran, it will get more cooperation if it has demonstrated first that it genuinely tried diplomacy.

Aims. Because the president was talking to Iran's leaders, he was effectively saying the U.S. recognizes their legitimacy and isn't overtly seeking a regime change.

In the past, American messages have been fairly obviously designed to say to the Iranian people: "We admire you, but we can't deal with your leaders. Get rid of those guys and we can do business."

This time, the message didn't even overtly try to influence the outcome of Iran's elections in June, when the future of bombastic President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be decided. Certainly the administration would be happy if a reasonable message prompted Iranian voters to produce more reasonable leaders. But the long search for Iranian "moderates" has proved so futile that the administration is prepared to deal with what it gets, not what it wishes it had.



Content. The message was designed to give the Iranians what they always complain they don't get: respect. Twice Mr. Obama referred to Iran by the title its leaders use, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the past, the U.S. has avoided that title, because using it would grant legitimacy to the country's clerical regime. Mr. Obama is turning that approach on its head, saying essentially that legitimacy, now recognized, comes with obligations.

Iran, Mr. Obama said, should "take its rightful place in the community of nations." But that position "comes with real responsibilities, and that place cannot be reached through terror or arms."

Follow-up. It isn't definite yet, but the administration is considering following the president's public overture with a private message directed not to Iran's civilian leader, Mr. Ahmadinejad, but to its clerical leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

That would illustrate what figures to be another hallmark of Obama diplomacy toward Iran: recognizing where the real power in Iran lies and going there.

Obviously, the principal goal of any outreach, however structured, is to stop Iran's nuclear program. America's friends in Israel fear time is running out for that, because Iran within a year will have accumulated enough low-enriched uranium to provide the material for a nuclear weapon. American leaders think the difficulty of further enriching that uranium and turning it into a weapon gives diplomacy and pressure more time.

The deeper question is whether outreach has any real chance to make a difference. Privately, senior administration officials harbor real doubts. Ayatollah Khamenei's blustery response to Mr. Obama's message, which demanded actions rather than words from the U.S., may have been a simple rejection, though it also may have been a sign that the bargaining is beginning.

If there is hope, it may lie in an observation offered by former national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier this month. Mr. Brzezinski noted that there is a significant difference between North Korea, which loudly proclaims its intention and its right to develop nuclear weapons, and Iran, which just as loudly proclaims that it doesn't want or need nuclear weapons, and that its religion actually forbids them. Whether those words are credible or not, Mr. Brzezinski said, they offer the U.S. an opening for negotiation.

That may be what the Obama team calculates. If the very Islamic nature of Iran is supposed to bar it from developing nuclear weapons, acknowledge that Islamic nature -- and then use it to call Iran on its claims. Oh, and meanwhile, seize the moral high ground in case that doesn't work.