

US gestures that could help in Iran

By Herbert C. Kelman

Iranian leaders have repeatedly hinted that a significant symbolic gesture on the part of the US authorities might help to resolve the current impasse at the US Embassy in Tehran and lead to a freeing of the hostages. Although we cannot assume that these hints represent official positions or that any particular US gesture would indeed produce the desired consequences, it is clearly in our interest to explore the kinds of actions that might elicit a positive response.

The central question is whether there are any gestures we can make — anything we can say or do — that would give something meaningful to the Iranian population and leadership and yet entail minimal costs to our own interests and values. I believe there are.

To identify appropriate gestures requires an active effort to look at events from an Iranian perspective and to understand the sources of their anxiety and suspicion, their frustration and anger. Such an effort to understand Iranian concerns though accompanied by rejection of the means they have chosen to express these concerns — would itself be appreciated.

We can go further, acknowledging that past US actions have themselves contributed to Iranian suspicion and anger, without in any way compromising our own interests and values — as long as we remain firm in our commitment to certain basic principles. We can be responsive to Iranian efforts to obtain redress,

through just and nonviolent means, for their legitimate grievances, and we can take a generally conciliatory and nonvindictive stance, without appearing weak, without losing credibility, and without discarding any of our options. For purposes of illustration, let me propose five points that a declaration by President Carter might contain:

- The US understands the suspicion and anger of many Iranians toward the US and recognizes that some of our past actions have contributed to these feelings. We have heard the message of these Iranians, as expressed by their recent actions against our citizens and demands from our government, and we will take it into account as we jointly develop a new relationship between our two countries. At the same time, we must totally reject the means they have chosen to convey that message: We consider the taking of hostages to be a fundamental violation of human rights and international law; and we cannot return the Shah to Iran under the present circumstances without violating our own basic principles.

- We assure the Iranian public that we are not engaged in a conspiracy to bring the Shah back to power, nor have we invited the Shah to settle permanently in the United States. There is absolutely no basis for the fear that the history of 1953 will repeat itself. US policy is based on the assumption that the Shah's removal from power is irreversible.

- We regret that US support for the Shah over the years may have contributed to some

of the acts of corruption, repression, and violation of human rights that were carried out by his regime. This is not the time and place to criticize or defend past policies of our government. Regardless of the justification for these policies, we recognize that they had some undesirable consequences for which we must bear part of the responsibility.

- We are prepared to cooperate with legitimate international bodies that seek to determine the status of the Shah's assets, and we intend to comply with the rulings of such bodies. We will not oppose the claims to these assets by the present government of Iran. We will also cooperate with efforts to bring Iranian grievances before the United Nations, the World Court, and/or a special international tribunal.

- We consider it wrong to hold Iranians who are living in the US hostage to the actions of their compatriots. We shall take no official action that singles them out for discrimination or harassment. And we shall discourage all such actions by private individuals or organizations.

What value do the statements proposed here have for the Iranian leaders and masses? They offer them respect for their humanity, assurance against their fears, recognition of their grievances, hope for future justice, acknowledgement of the wrong that has been done to them and of our partial responsibility for it. There is no certainty that gestures such as these would be sufficient to bring about the release of the hostages, but they would at least

provide some levers to those elements in the Iranian decisionmaking circles who are looking for a peaceful way of ending the confrontation.

And what costs would such gestures entail for us? They would not, in my view, compromise our interests and values or weaken our bargaining position. We would not be barred from pursuing our interests in whatever ways seemed indicated. Our ability to be conciliatory, generous, and self-critical — combined with our firm commitment to basic principles — would be seen by observers as a sign of strength rather than weakness.

In referring to the past, we would be acknowledging facts that we and everyone else already know to be true. All we would be sacrificing would be the satisfaction that comes from expressing our anger and frustration and insisting that we cannot be pushed around. It is worth sacrificing these forms of self-indulgence in order to find ways of influencing the behavior of our adversary. The gestures proposed here have the potential of exerting such influence. They may not only contribute to the release of the hostages, but also provide a basis for constructive dialogue with Iran after the present crisis has been resolved.

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