

## Avoid Repeating Mistakes toward Iran

The United States and Iran have been locked in a historically rare relationship: Washington and Tehran have not been able to talk to each other in a meaningful and consistent way. This pattern was not seen even during the Cold War between the United States and its communist adversaries. If the factors which have perpetuated this state of non-communication (or failing engagement) continue to go ignored, it is unreasonable to expect a negotiated solution in the coming months or years. This essay seeks to answer three questions: First, why have Iran and the United States been unable to engage in sustained dialogue aimed at détente and minimal cooperation? Second, why will current U.S. policies toward Iran's nuclear program likely fail, leading to a war that would make Iran weaponize? Third, what strategies and policies should be implemented to end the standoff over Iran's nuclear program, and facilitate détente between the two countries?

### **The Perilous State of Relations**

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The spiraling conflict between the United States and Iran is multifaceted. Currently, the United States is most focused on Iran's uranium enrichment and is determined to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons capability. But from the U.S. government's perspective, major dimensions of the conflict over time have included threats to the security of Israel, sponsoring terrorism, abusing human rights, and inspiring anti-Americanism in the region.

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## Current U.S. policies toward Iran's nuclear program will likely fail.

From the Iranian government's perspective, the most important dimension of the conflict is the American existential threat to the Islamic regime, as articulated in its 2007 policy paper:

[F]rom the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran, [the United States and the West] have assailed the existence, independence and sovereignty of our country by raising issues such as human rights, export of revolution, women's

rights, minorities rights, sponsoring terrorism, opposition to the so-called Middle East peace process, efforts to destabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally our peaceful nuclear technology as pretext... America, under the slogan of sponsoring democracy, explicitly talks about regime change in one of the most democratic countries in the region and the world.<sup>1</sup>

On the nuclear issue, Iran maintains that it is simply doing what the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) allows it to do. Under the NPT, a signatory state has the right to enrich uranium for use as fuel for civil nuclear power. As U.S. officials admit, Iran is not yet building a bomb, but the United States remains concerned that Iran is aiming to develop a nuclear military capability. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in its February 2012 report also expressed concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program.<sup>2</sup>

To stop Iran from advancing in the military direction, the United States has applied a policy of pressure and insists that Iran abide by UN resolutions which demand a halt to uranium enrichment until all concerns about the nature of its nuclear program are addressed. The United States has both led international efforts to craft and impose sanctions (through the UN and the EU) and has unilaterally launched its own crippling economic and financial sanctions against Iran. It has also sought to isolate Tehran internationally, while supporting domestic Iranian political opposition and disgruntled ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic has refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program. Iran maintains that the UN resolutions against it are politically motivated, and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as recently as October 2012 said, "[The West's] real objective is [forcing] the Iranian nation to surrender to their bullying at the negotiating table... [but] you are too weak to bring Iran to its knees."<sup>4</sup>

Aside from resisting pressures, Iran has also responded with acts of its own. It has gradually increased the number of centrifuges spinning in the nation's uranium enrichment plants (from the initial 164 in 2006 to around 9000 in Natanz and 3000 in Fordow now in 2012), and it is enriching uranium to 20 percent.<sup>5</sup> The Pentagon claims that the Islamic Republic has used its Quds Force to make the United States "bleed" in Iraq, and according to Khamenei, Tehran

has provided logistical support to anti-Israeli forces in the region. Moreover, Khamenei has issued a new policy of “threat against threat.”<sup>6</sup> This threat policy has been a major reason for the 2012 rise in oil prices. Unable to resolve their disputes through diplomacy, the two sides continue to resort to confrontational policies.<sup>7</sup>

To fulfill the objective of getting Iran to suspend uranium enrichment activities until all questions with regard to its nuclear project are addressed, the United States, according to the State Department, “is committed to a dual-track policy of applying pressure in pursuit of constructive engagement, and a negotiated solution.”<sup>8</sup> Many experts use “dual-track” and “carrot-and-stick” policies interchangeably, where the “carrots” are economic or other incentives for Iran to abandon its nuclear program, and the “sticks” refer to sanctions and other pressure. Initially, the U.S. approach was a carrot-and-stick policy—over time, though, the policy has become all stick.

U.S. experts on Iran Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh in a 2011 paper reaffirmed this harsher version of the carrot-and-stick policy. They assert that the Obama administration started out in 2009 with a “passionate determination to emphasize carrots,” and claim that “the United States and the international community have offered Iran a path toward a responsible civilian nuclear program . . . should it conform to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations.” They then admit that “the current version of the two-track policy has failed” and propose more biting measures directed at the regime’s security.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to assertions by Pollack and Takeyh, among others, the problem with the carrot-and-stick policy is not that it was not biting enough, but that it is based on the wrong premises. For starters, the rationale behind the U.S. view that Iran may be developing nuclear weapons is weak. First, no country has developed nuclear weapons while remaining a signatory to the NPT. If Iran’s plan were to build nuclear weapons, it could withdraw from the NPT by giving the IAEA a required three-month advance notice, and then reconfigure its facilities for weapon production. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) followed this path in 2003, and in 2006 tested its first nuclear weapon underground.

Second, if Iran instead intends to acquire atomic weapons covertly, why then would it invite draconian sanctions and the threat of war by stubbornly insisting on continuing its overt nuclear activities? If we were to accept the view of many high-ranking Americans, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey and President Obama,<sup>10</sup> that the leaders in Iran are rational actors, then Tehran’s insistence on pursuing its nuclear program despite IAEA supervision does not pass a rational cost-benefit test.

Finally, the assumption that pressure works with Iran is also a misplaced understanding of the carrot-and-stick policy. The policy measures, including

tough sanctions, can and have crippled the Iranian economy and harmed the population, particularly those in the lower income brackets. Tightening and toughening sanctions as well as other isolating measures will further cause the country's quality of life to deteriorate. The impact on the regime, however, will not be devastating enough to make it concede, and even if it was, Iran would not give up its rights to uranium enrichment.

## **Why Does Carrot-and-Stick Fail with Iran?**

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Pollack and Takeyh use Obama's failed March 2009 overture to Iran to justify Washington's shift to an all-coercive policy. What they fail to offer is an in-depth explanation for why Tehran turned down Obama's reconciliatory move. Instead, they make a passing reference to the roles of mistrust and ideology: "the strategy of engagement that we proposed and the Bush and Obama administrations implemented was bedeviled by its core intellectual misjudgment—discounting ideology and mistrust of the United States as critical ingredients of Iran's international relations."<sup>11</sup> Their analysis gives no explanation why "mistrust" and "ideology" are key problems in bilateral relations. Nor does their policy recommendation to "double down" on Iran address their own findings of the root causes of failure of engagement.

Contrary to the logic of their analytical contention, Pollack and Takeyh recommend a new tougher policy by suggesting more coercive measures and doubling down in order to directly harm the regime. If mistrust and ideology have been major factors in the failure of the previous policies, then obviously intensifying pressures and directly targeting the survival of the ideological regime will elevate the level of mistrust and conflict even higher, thus minimizing the likelihood of a cogent negotiation process.

It is our contention that a broader and deeper explanation of the causes of the conflict between Iran and the United States, and the prevailing state of non-communication between the two governments, should logically lead to a new policy paradigm. The new perspective must at the least account for the important role that mistrust, perceptions about national identity, and misanalysis play in U.S.–Iran relations. We further believe that unless U.S. policy toward Iran takes the challenge and considers these factors in its approach, it will have no chance of changing Iran's behavior.

### **Historical Mistrust**

Mistrust has long been a feature of the U.S.–Iran relationship. The role of the United States in the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran's popular Prime Minister, is central to this dynamic. The coup against Mossadegh happened after he nationalized the Iranian oil industry, which at the time was

under British control. Following the coup, the Shah's repressive regime emerged as a major Cold War ally of the United States. The Shah's modernization program, promoted by the United States, would try to "westernize" Iran and thus marginalize the traditional and Islamic cultures. In resistance to the Shah's policies, an Islamic movement under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged.

In a 1964 fiery speech directed at the Shah, Khomeini said, "if our country is under American occupation then tell us."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after the speech, he was exiled from Iran. Subsequently, the modernization program accelerated and attacks on conservative political Islam represented by the Ayatollah increased. (For example, to denigrate Khomeini and his followers, the Shah's regime used the derogatory term *erteja-e siah*, or black reactionaries.) Thus, when the Islamic Republic of Iran came to exist, seeds of hostility between the two states had already been planted.

Just months after the victory of the Iranian revolution, the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was seized by a group of radical Muslim students, exacerbating already tense relations between the two countries. The hostage crisis developed into a much larger episode than the students had envisioned: the religious ruling elite used it to consolidate power and eliminate political rivals. However, backed by an array of evidence, professor of political science David Houghton concluded that the initial motivation for hostage-taking came from a feeling of deep insecurity for the revolution, originating from a strong sense of mistrust of the United States and the determination to prevent a repeat of the 1953 coup.<sup>13</sup>

After the Shah entered the United States in October 1979, following the victory of the revolution that ousted him from power, Ayatollah Khomeini in an interview with a Western journalist said, "When we have been bitten by a snake, we are even afraid of a piece of rope which from afar looks like a snake . . . We fear you socially and politically."<sup>14</sup> As one of the hostage-takers years later explained, with the admission of the Shah to the United States, we thought "the countdown for another coup d'état had begun."<sup>15</sup> And as a former American hostage correctly put it, "America's role in the collapse of the Mossadegh government in 1953 was as immediate and alive to the people as if it had occurred yesterday."<sup>16</sup> Iranians have a long historical memory.

In the American political realm, in turn, the 444-day-long hostage crisis has created a lasting mistrust of the Iranian regime. In the words of former National Security Council member Gary Sick, "the underlying belief [was] that we were dealing not only with a government that had flouted the laws of nations . . . but with a regime that was historically illegitimate, unfit, despicable."<sup>17</sup> The American view of Iran became even more negative as a result of events like the bombings of American embassies in 1983 in Beirut and 1998 in Africa, the 1996 Khobar Towers terrorist attack against Americans in Saudi Arabia, and

attacks against American troops in Iraq. The 2002 revelation of years of clandestine Iranian nuclear activities took the Americans' mistrust of Iran to new heights.

CSIS expert Anthony Cordesman et al contend that "mistrust now affects every aspect of U.S.–Iranian competition over energy, economics, trade, sanctions, and the nuclear issue."<sup>18</sup> If this is so, it seems odd that policymakers and analysts have remained silent about taking steps to bridge that mistrust. Furthermore, the adopted policies to date have largely intensified mistrust between the two countries. One could argue, as Pollack and Takeyh do, that President Obama tried to address the issue but was rebuffed by the Supreme Leader of Iran. However, as we shall explain in the next section, this assertion is deeply flawed.

**Adopted policies to date have largely intensified mistrust between the two countries.**

### **National Pride and Rights**

The "carrot-and-stick" policy was not a solution, and the current "stick-only" approach is even less promising. Tehran perceives either as extremely disrespectful.<sup>19</sup> Mohamed ElBaradei, when heading the IAEA, repeatedly reminded U.S. leaders that "carrot-and-stick... is a policy suitable for a donkey but not for a proud nation."<sup>20</sup> Pride has a significant place in Iran's national identity, rooted in their long civilization and cultural heritage.

For example, Tehran's rejection of President Barack Obama's 2009 televised message for "a new beginning" was predictable given the role of pride in Iranian culture. Yet, American officials and most Iran experts saw the reaction as a vicious rebuff of Obama's conciliatory move. It is true that the message included an unprecedented overture, but it is also true that it implicitly accused the Iranian regime of supporting terror and building nuclear arms. In Khamenei's view, once again the carrot-and-stick policy was on display. He immediately criticized Obama, saying, "[T]hey congratulate the Iranian New Year, but, at the same time, accuse Iran of supporting terrorism and efforts to gain access to nuclear weapons.... Our nation...hates [the policy of] threat and enticement."<sup>21</sup>

Iran experts such as George Perkovich and Shahram Chubin have posited that this national pride drives Iran's nuclear program,<sup>22</sup> and Kamal Kharrazi, Iran's former Foreign Minister, once said that "no government can relinquish a program that has gained it national pride."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Iranians believe (98 percent) that the possession of nuclear energy is a national right.<sup>24</sup> This is not only a legal statement; it is a sentiment of pride. Pride and rights are thus closely connected. Given that they help drive Iran's nuclear program, it is only logical

that they should receive due consideration in formulating solutions to the deadlock.

This powerful sentiment concerning pride and its pervasive role in Iran's nuclear program has appeared incomprehensible to Western analysts and policymakers alike. ElBaradei has reportedly reminded the Obama administration that in seeking a solution to Iran's nuclear impasse, it is necessary "to design an approach that is sensitive to Iran's pride."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the Iranian political leaders, the Supreme Leader in particular, would incur a high cost if they were to back down from the nuclear issue, given that they have constantly linked it to national pride and rights, often comparing the program to the oil nationalization in 1950s.

The official U.S. explanation for why Iran refuses to suspend uranium enrichment is that it is seeking to develop a "nuclear weapon capability." In our humble opinion, this is an inaccurate assessment. Should not they also consider "national pride" as an alternative explanation? Adjusting this perception could help U.S. policymakers to effectively negotiate with Iran. The Iranian leadership cannot agree to

**The Iranian leadership cannot agree to conduct negotiations which have no regard for its pride.**

conduct negotiations which have no regard for its pride and rights. Even an awareness of this issue can help address concerns of Iranian political leaders, who often accuse U.S. officials of speaking in tones that are disrespectful and derogatory in the rare moments when they do engage. True, the Iranians also often speak in undiplomatic and disrespectful language, but reciprocating such behavior has only worsened the problem.

In the Muslim Middle East, particularly in Shi'a Iran, resistance is a key characteristic of the traditional culture. Drawing on Islamic teachings, Khamenei has constantly preached about the superiority of believers over worldly people in defending their values, honor, and dignity. Khamenei himself has become a symbol of resistance to the United States and Israel, a position that provides him with authority and stature as the Guardian Jurist, or Supreme Leader. There is a serious concern that his position will be ruined if he were to surrender Iran's "inalienable rights," as he has often put it, to nuclear energy under humiliating conditions.

It is no wonder that coercive policies, which ignore the Iranian traditional resistance culture, have been a powerful impediment to negotiations between the two states. Continuing policies of coercion and humiliation could, we believe, backfire very badly: first, the Iranian Supreme Leader believes in the glory of becoming a martyr for Islam, his beloved religion; and second, he and the power elite tend to believe that Iran is powerful enough to defeat the United

**P**articularly in Shi'a Iran, resistance is a key characteristic of the traditional culture.

States by harming its interests in the region with irregular warfare. General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, repeatedly cites Hezbollah's 2006 33-Day War and Hamas's 2009 22-Day War with Israel as examples of how belief in Islam and the spirit of martyrdom can defeat powerful armies.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Iran could retaliate very strongly, rather than capitulate, even if that resistance was to lead to martyrdom.

### **Misunderstanding Iranian Politics**

Another factor that has harmed U.S. policy is the misanalysis of Iran's domestic political struggle. Iran's 2009 contested presidential election is a case in point. The dispute over who won the race prompted street protests and violent oppression by the government. In the West, the United States in particular, the Green Movement became a new source of hope for regime change and halting Iran's nuclear program. Ray Takeyh argued that "the only thing standing between the mullahs and the bomb is the Green Movement," and Richard Haas posited that "control [over Iran's nuclear program] won't be won at the negotiating table, but on the streets. The West must make clear its support for the protesters."<sup>27</sup>

These arguments are based on a serious misunderstanding. In sharp contrast to the widespread view among Western political pundits and policymakers, the Green Movement was not a struggle of *people* against the *regime*. Rather, it was mainly a struggle between two camps: the religious conservatives (traditionalists) who supported both the regime and the principle of absolute guardianship of the jurist, and liberals, both Islamic and secular. The liberals opposed tough restrictions on social and political liberties imposed by the conservatives. Islamic liberals supported the system but demanded "the full execution of the constitution,"<sup>28</sup> while secular liberals, generally younger, wished to overthrow the system entirely, but accepted the leadership of the religious liberals, including President Mohammad Khatami as well as 2009 presidential finalists, Mahdi Karubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, with former President Rafsanjani supporting them on the sideline.

The Green Movement was primarily supported by the young middle- and upper middle-class urbanites, but also included many intellectuals, writers, artists, and academics. The protest made no economic demands, suggesting that the uprising was a civil rights movement. In other words, the Green Movement reflected the will and demands of religious and secular liberal middle- and upper middle-class factions of society, not the entire population, particularly the working class.



According to a report on the now-banned website of Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign, the real number of votes in the 2009 election was 21.3 million for Mousavi and 10.5 million for Ahmadinejad.<sup>29</sup> If these figures were accurate, the conservative power elite that rules Iran, at the time represented by Ahmadinejad, had at least 10 million supporters. In addition, given that Mousavi was also approved by the ultraconservative Guardian Council, a portion of the conservatives must have voted for him. Therefore, while the street demonstrators were representing a good portion of the population, the regime also enjoyed considerable support. Besides, in contrast to the supporters of the Green Movement, followers of the conservatives are organized, in power, ready to use brute force, and are prepared to make sacrifices for the Islamic system. In conclusion, in our humble opinion, the 2009 protests did not reflect a struggle between the people and the regime, but the revival of a fight between the forces of tradition and modernity, a battle that dates back to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

**Iran believes that it is powerful enough to harm U.S. interests with irregular warfare.**

Some argue that even if the Green Movement cannot change the regime or its behavior, supporting the Movement can still work to weaken or delegitimize the regime. This argument is problematic for at least three reasons: first, internationally, the more the regime is discredited, the more difficult it will be for the United States to pursue engagement with it; second, to enter into dialogue with a repressive and illegitimate regime would also be a hard sell domestically for any U.S. administration; and third, using the movement as an instrument of U.S. policy will indeed only strengthen the regime in its fight against reformist groups, including those inside the Green Movement.

Our assertions by no means suggest that the U.S. government should be indifferent to human rights violations in Iran; it should speak out against such abuses loudly and clearly. However, supporting the human rights of the Iranian people is one thing; relying on the Green Movement to change the behavior of the regime or overthrow it is something else. Ignoring the theocratic and revolutionary nature of the Iranian government and belittling its staying power have been most counterproductive for both U.S.–Iran relations and the reform movement in Iran. That strategy has, contrary to expectations, justified more repression as well as tougher restrictions on sociopolitical liberties in Iran since 2009, and it has solidified and heightened mistrust in a relationship already dominated by suspicion.

## U.S. policy has misanalyzed Iran's domestic political struggle, including the Green Movement.

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### Galvanizing against Regime Change

Finally, galvanizing against regime change is another fundamental factor in the U.S.–Iran conflict. Since the Shah's admission into the United States, Tehran has perceived regime change" as the real aim of U.S. policies. Multiple factors reinforce this notion, including President Bush's "axis of evil" speech, articulation of the preventive war doctrine, U.S. support for the opposition to

destabilize the regime, and imposing paralyzing sanctions. Reporting by the international media on alleged U.S. covert operations "to sow chaos in Iran" have further fueled these Iranian suspicions.<sup>31</sup>

Khamenei strongly holds that, when faced with bullying and intimidation, the way to success is not to retreat from the enemy. This view was reinforced when Khamenei allowed former reformist President Mohammed Khatami to suspend enrichment in 2003 for almost two years, but was subsequently presented with a negotiating package from the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany) that even Khatami's government characterized as insulting and humiliating.

Resisting pressure is a broadly shared view among the ruling hardliners in Iran, layman and clergy alike. They believe that suspension of the nuclear program "under coercion" would open the door to more coercion and U.S. demands of more concessions. Grand Ayatollah Makarem once remarked that "even if the nuclear issue is resolved, [foreign powers] will start making claims about human rights, freedom of the press . . . We have to be careful and never accede to their demands."<sup>32</sup> This suspicion of regime change is a key obstacle to finding a solution to the nuclear dispute.

### Sticks Won't Help

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Ultimately, proponents of the "carrot-and-stick" policy argue that as the Iranian regime's survival is threatened under sanctions, the leadership will have no choice but to surrender. This is invalid on a number of grounds. First, as already mentioned, an "endangered" Islamic Republic will be ready to take retaliatory actions as it has nothing more to lose. The radicalized regime has already adopted a policy of "threat for threat" and may adopt other measures, such as destabilizing Iraq and the Persian Gulf (Strait of Hormuz). Contrary to U.S. perceptions, the issue is not keeping the Strait open, but keeping it safe and secure for the uninterrupted flow of oil, which will not be the case if Iran were to destabilize the waterway. Iran could particularly create troubles in Iraq through its Quds Force, now that the United States has left the country and Iraq is

becoming a rival oil producer; the Quds Force is well-entrenched in Iraq and already works closely with its anti-American allies there. Against Iranian retaliatory measures, the United States may be forced into war.

Second, one could argue that sanctions would work in moving regime supporters toward the Green Movement, making it easier for the opposition to overthrow the ruling elite. Even if this is true, it would take time. Indeed, prolonged sanctions with no concrete outcome may provide the Iranian regime with enough time to develop nuclear arms, if in fact it intends to do so. And the more its survival is threatened, the greater the likelihood of building nuclear arsenal.

Third, protracted crippling sanctions can also create a moral dilemma: while the United States says it supports the human rights of the Iranian people, it cannot justify prolonged sanctions that would harm ordinary Iranians, particularly its jobless youth. This is already happening, and it is leading to declining support for the United States among the Iranian people.

Finally, it is a mistake to assume, as Americans do, that economic and financial pressures, including sanctions on oil, would make the development of nuclear weapons difficult for Iran. Iran may be dependent on oil revenue, but its economy is the most diversified in the region. Moreover, even a poor country can produce an atomic bomb, as seen with Pakistan and North Korea. To conclude, the “stick-only” approach will not work—sanctions and isolation will fail to change Iran’s behavior or its regime. Under life-threatening pressure Iran will retaliate, especially in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and if the threat of war was to become real, then Iran would weaponize. As expert Vali Nasr has aptly put it “at some point sanctions become an act of war.”<sup>33</sup> As sanctions fail and Iran becomes more belligerent, patience in Israel and the United States for diplomacy will wane.

## **One Last Chance to Make it Right**

The fundamental problem with U.S. policies toward Iran is the assumption that the Islamic regime will respond favorably to coercion. The lack of in-depth knowledge about Iranian society, culture, and politics is significantly responsible for this mistaken assumption and subsequent policy. For instance, only a few American analysts and policymakers know Farsi, and not many Iranian-American analysts visit Iran. Worse yet, of those who travel to that country, only a handful ever come in contact with ordinary Iranians, and even fewer have ever interacted with the ruling elite, influential clergy, and high-ranking officials to acquire first-hand knowledge of their views and motivations. Reliance on Iran’s internet users and social networks has been particularly problematic since they do not represent the whole society nor the deep thinking within the regime.

While understanding a historical and cultural country like Iran is a difficult task, it is not impossible and could do much for constructive dialogue. Toward a better understanding of Iran, the U.S. government must make serious investment in Iranian studies focused on the language, culture, and contemporary history. It must also do everything in its power to expand exchange programs with Iranian universities, and do so in a way that is acceptable to Tehran. It is particularly important to ensure that American investment dollars for a better understanding of Iran are not directed toward individuals and groups with political agendas. What the United States needs most is an objective analysis of the situation on the ground in Iran, as misanalysis has been counterproductive in U.S.–Iran relations.

The good news for the troubled relationship is that both sides are rational actors, although the Iranian rationality has its own limits given the sensational nature of its culture. While no one has questioned American rationality, few until recently believed that the leaders in Tehran were also rational, mistaking their resistance to coercion and humiliation with irrationality. This misunderstanding is gradually but surely changing among officials in the United States, Israel, and Europe. Indeed, Iranian leaders in many crises have shown that they understand and apply the so-called cost-benefit principle in the absence of pressure. For instance, despite intense animosity between Iran and the United States, Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Khamenei have both allowed relations with the United States when they became beneficial.

Despite increasing coercion, Iran has continued to keep its doors open for a possible respectful settlement of its problems with the United States. In November 2011, for example, an article by an Iranian conservative analyst, Amir Mohebbian, was posted on Khamenei's website. The article stated that the Supreme Leader "will consider a rational change in American behavior" toward Iran. This last March, Ayatollah Khamenei welcomed comments by U.S. President Obama tamping down talk of war against Tehran, saying "This talk is good talk and shows an exit from illusion."<sup>34</sup> Iran now seems to be looking for any opportunity to reduce tension, including possible direct talks with the United States.<sup>35</sup>

The successful April 2012 talks in Istanbul are another example of the new confidence-building environment that Iran is trying to promote. Even before this meeting, Iran had allowed the IAEA to visit Iran's most sensitive nuclear sites, including R&D sites for centrifuges and heavy water (these visits fall outside the NPT). Under the condition of anonymity, an Iranian official told one of the authors of this paper that last summer "Iran also accepted the Russian plan for incremental resolution of the nuclear dispute and within that framework accepted to implement the Additional Protocol of the Safeguard Agreement

and the code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements to the Safeguard Agreement.”<sup>36</sup>

The will for better relations and a solution to the nuclear impasse has always existed. However, the two sides have not been able to communicate and compromise. As Georgetown professor Charles Kupchan explains, in order to turn former enemies in international politics into friends, the first step is the most crucial one—and that step should be a unilateral act taken by the stronger power.<sup>37</sup> He contends that this is essential to build the trust of the weaker competitor for discussion and cooperation. Diplomatic engagement with rivals, far from being appeasement, is critical to conflict resolution.

Mediation is another essential idea to help engage the United States and Iran sustainably and constructively. The potential mediator must be familiar with both Iranian as well as Western cultures and must have friendly relations with both governments. This entity’s role would be to educate the parties about the nuances of each other’s actions and perceptions, and correct chronic misunderstandings. It is a fact that leaders in Iran and in the United States are unfamiliar with the other side’s political culture. For example, Iranian leaders do not understand that the U.S. president or its vice-president is constrained by the U.S. Congress, interest groups, and public opinion. American leaders, too, are very unfamiliar with Iranian domestic political games and are often confused as to why so many voices speak in so many seemingly contradictory directions, while Ayatollah Khamenei is supposedly the absolute power.

## How to Resolve the Nuclear Dispute

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To resolve the nuclear dispute, the parties must prepare to make compromises. First, the United States should abandon its language of threat and intimidation. It would have been helpful if the United States had publicly denounced the policy of regime change, however, it could still use mediation to convey that message, and to reaffirm it privately and in practice. The current unrelenting attitude provokes sharp reactions from Tehran, escalates the conflict, and blocks the formation of negotiations. The issue of pride and its role in Iran’s politics cannot be ignored—the only way to encourage Iran’s cooperation is for the United States to assume a new attitude toward Iran. Conversely, Iran also should ignore rhetoric from U.S. hard-liners who have no power and often speak to domestic audiences. The mediator’s explanations to the Iranians would be helpful in this respect.

Second, for the reasons discussed in this paper, Iran will not concede to a complete halt in its enrichment program. The United States can agree to let Iran continue enriching uranium up to 5 percent purity, in exchange for strict monitoring and the implementation of Additional Protocols, including

**Iran will not concede to a complete halt in its enrichment program.**

unannounced inspections. Mohammad Javad Larijani, a key foreign policy advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei, has announced that Iran is prepared to accept even “permanent human monitoring” in exchange for Western cooperation.<sup>38</sup> If this plan is complemented by a proposal to sell Iran the necessary amount of 20 percent uranium rods for its medical purposes, then Iran can be persuaded to

transfer to a third country any uranium enriched beyond 5 percent. The United States could use the agreement between Iran, Turkey, and Brazil in May 2010 as the basis for the swap. Iran may also temporarily deactivate its Fordow underground plant as a step in the direction of building trust with the United States.

Third, were Iran to make such concessions, the United States should reciprocate by easing sanctions and abandoning the “all options are on the table” mantra. It would have been helpful if the United States had made this policy change publicly. However, it could use mediation to convey this message and passively withdraw the mantra. This phrase has done nothing positive to solve the conflict. In fact, Iranian leaders see it as bullying by arrogant powers. Thus, a reversal of the sanctions trend could be a major step toward building trust, and would also help advance a more step-by-step approach and reciprocity, policies that were discussed and implicitly agreed upon during the Istanbul meetings.

Fourth, the United States must seriously consider stopping its clandestine operations inside Iran as they are a major source of Iran’s hostility toward the United States. The United States must renounce any attempt at harming Iran’s territorial integrity and must send a message through a trusted mediator that it does not support destabilizing activities. The *New York Times* has reported the existence of a “Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force Execute Order” that was signed in September 2009 by General David Petraeus, then CENTCOM Commander.<sup>39</sup> The order authorizes sending U.S. Special Operations personnel to Iran “to gather intelligence about the country’s nuclear program” and “identify dissident groups that might be useful for a future military offensive.” Also, some news reports have revealed that dangerous “false flag” operations have been conducted by the Israeli Mossad inside Iran.<sup>40</sup> According to some CIA memos, Israel has been engaged in recruiting operatives belonging to the Iranian terrorist group, Jundallah, by pretending to act as American agents. Iranians would not believe that these operations have been conducted without Washington’s approval.

Finally, although the U.S. government must not take a neutral stance toward human rights violations in Iran, it also must not use them as a policy instrument toward regime change. Contrary to expectations, the U.S. human rights policy toward Iran has justified more repression and tougher restrictions on social and political liberties in Iran, particularly since the 2009 elections. This policy is also counterproductive because Washington applies a double standard to various repressive states in the region. For example, right after the Saudi crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in Bahrain, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced new sanctions on Iran “to hold accountable those governments and officials that violate human rights.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Navigating the Crossroads**

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To conclude, the status quo is unstable. Many expect negotiations before the spring or summer of 2013 to be the last chance to reach a negotiated solution on Iran’s nuclear program or war will result. With existing policies in place, despite their biting intensity, given Iran’s determined resistance, a war becomes inevitable leading Iran to nuclear weaponization. Only regime change or recognition of Iran’s right to uranium enrichment (even if it does not actually do so above 5 percent) can prevent these eventualities. Given the state of the Iranian opposition, in the absence of a destructive war, regime change is not possible. On the basis of this understanding, and in the interest of regional stability and world peace, we humbly call for a paradigm change and have offered these recommendations to change the carrot-and-stick policy.

The United States and Iran have arrived at a crossroads of peace and war, and must now choose between the two roads in front of them. War is a costly option for both (indeed all) sides, and is hardly advisable in the world’s current political and economic environment. The imperatives for peace are obvious. In order to break through this impasse, it is necessary for the two states to engage in sustained dialogue and reach an agreement that would prevent both Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and a regional war between these two powerful and prideful countries. Finally, peace on the nuclear issue alone while other cases of conflict remain unresolved would be unstable. A peaceful resolution to Iran’s nuclear issue should be considered as a strong starting point for a grand deal between the two states.

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