

US-Iran Relations since 9-11: A Monologue of Civilizations

Paul Sullivan*

American Perceptions of Iran¹:

September 11, 2001 is seared into the minds of many Americans as 911. If you mention this number to anyone in the US they will think of the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon attacks, and the 3,000 persons who were murdered that day. If one mentions the number 444 to many Americans, they will immediately think of the hostages from the US Embassy held by Iran for 444 days.

For many Americans the first things that come to mind when one mentions Iran are: the hostage crisis, the bombing of the marine barracks and the embassy in Lebanon in the early 1980s, support for Hezbollah and other “terrorist” groups, and mullahs in black turbans leading demonstrators yelling “Marg bar Amrika” (Death to America).

Many Americans do not have good feelings about Iran². The press has not helped. The Congress, with its many laws and regulations, and resolutions, has hardened certain perspectives³. The lobbyists have pressured the President and Capitol Hill to keep the pressure on Iran. The voices in Iran that seem to get through the most are those of the hardliners who rant against the US at almost any opportunity. Not many Americans think of the many people who signed the sympathy books in Tehran after 9-11, or that reformist leaders in Iran made statements of sympathy toward the US. Even some of the hardliners condemned the 9-11 attacks. Many in the US may also be unaware of the growing pro-Americanism amongst the youth in Iran.

Many in the US government are wary of the revolutionary aspects of the Iranian government, especially the hardliners. However, the domino theory that was once proposed did not happen. Iran attempted to export its revolution to many parts of the Islamic world. One of the few places that it took hold seems to be in the Shia community of Lebanon, especially amongst members of Hezbollah. However, even they are working within the political system of Lebanon, and understand that it is unlikely that Lebanon, a multi-religious state, could ever be an Islamic republic.

Most of the violent or revolutionary movements in the Islamic world seem to be tied to local social, economic, and political circumstances. They are also mostly Sunni movements. The Iranian Revolution may have been somewhat inspiring to some who were considering Islamic revolution in their countries. However, all of these attempts, such as those in Algeria, Egypt, the West Bank and Gaza, and in Turkey (the most feeble attempt) proved to be failures. Also, the violent attempts at regime change in Egypt and Algeria did not pick up steam until after the return of the “Arab Afghans” in 1992, after the fall of Kabul. One could say that the real driving force behind jihadist movements in North Africa came from Afghanistan and the “Great Jihad”, rather than from Iran.

Regime change in Sudan may have had some small Iranian aspect to it, but the power of the change came mostly from inside from the efforts of Omar Bashir and Hassan Al-Turabi, with some emphasis from Sadeq Al-Mahdi. The development of an Islamic republic in Sudan also seems to be something of a failure economically, politically, and socially. About ½ of Sudan’s population is animist or Christian. It is hardly an easy land to turn into another Iran.

The Taliban's Afghanistan was supported mostly by Iran's rival Pakistan, and its ISI, and, in a way, Saudi Arabia. (The only countries to recognize the Taliban were Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Recognition is a form of support.)

Political Islam after 1979 was mostly due to the multiple failures of nationalist movements that occurred during and after the independence of the mostly Muslim states – and not because of the influence of Iran

Saudi Arabia's countermoves against Iran in their battle to "control" the ideological development of Islam may have helped stem the tide of Iranian attempts at exporting its mostly indigenously-based revolution. Certain negative things have been produced from the misuse of Saudi funds in their attempts to spread of Wahhabism (essentially an austere version of Islam that seems to not have the violent interpretations that the salafist-jihadists like the Taliban give to it). It may end up that the combination of this misuse of funds and other activities on the part of certain "Saudi and 'wahhabist' elements" (not in the Government, but private activities) added in to the effects of the blowback from the "Great Jihad" in Afghanistan could be much worse than anything Iran has done.

Many in the US are upset about Iran's interferences in the peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Hardliners in Iran have often stated that the peace process is not in their advantage, or even that it is a sham. The Karine-A incident earlier this year has highlighted for some that Iran is still very much involved in disrupting the process. Even if it is only "Iranian elements", the government of Iran is still responsible for the activities of even its most extreme members.

There are also some in Congress and elsewhere who are convinced that Iran supplies weapons to certain Palestinian and Lebanese groups on a continuing basis via Syria. There are

also some in the US Government who are convinced that Iran has some troops (Pasdaran) in Lebanon. Iran has been involved with Hezbollah, a Shia group, in Lebanon for a very long time.

The US on many occasions has mentioned that Iran has interfered in its interests in many parts of the world (but seemed to have turned a blind eye to Iranian supplies to the Bosnians during the “Balkans Crisis”). The State Department of the US has often listed Iran as one of the major sources of state-sponsored terrorism. Iran has been alleged to be involved in the attack on the military barracks called Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, although once again the term used is “Iranian elements”.

George Bush’s State-of-the-Union speech in January 2002, wherein he mentioned Iran as part of the “axis of evil” did not come out of a vacuum. There have been many persons in successive administrations who have claimed that Iran was a source of “evil”. Ronald Reagan directly said it was a “source of evil”. Back then he was dealing with the bombings of a Marine barracks and an embassy in Lebanon, and a series of hijacking and hostage taking.

There is also fear and distrust of Islam on the part of some persons in authority in the US, who could be put in a “confrontationist” camp. There are some others, who would rather be “accommodationists”. They do not see Islam as a threat, but as a challenge that has certain opportunities.

If anything, the US foreign policy establishment, the US media, and many in the US public have somewhat inflexible views about Iran. The fact that “dual containment” passed so easily, and that the renewal of ILSA last summer, before 9-11, passed with a 96-2 vote in the Senate show how much enmity there is in the US government toward Iran. The Byzantine and crushing regulations and laws on the books in the US directed against Iran and Iranian citizens are other examples. Citizens of Iran are fingerprinted upon arrival in the US. This started before

9-11. They are one of a very few groups of people that need to do this in order to gain entry into the US.

There seem to be very few in the US who are willing to take the risks to try to improve relations with Iran⁴. There are very few “reformists” in the US when it comes to US-Iran relations. One notable exception may be Senator Biden. He has been rather vocal in his attempts to open doors with Iran. He even invited Iranian parliamentarians to visit Congress in 2002. It is very rare for an Iranian official to be invited to Washington.

In October of 2001, Hadi Nejad-Hosseinian, Iran’s representative to the US did meet with some persons from Congress and others. Then there was the famous handshake between Colin Powell and Iran’s Foreign Minister Kemal Kharazi (now former Foreign Minister). These are small things, but given the bitterness and silence of the relations between the two countries for 22+ years, these were seen by many to be signals for a possible warming due, in part to the shock of 9-11, and also due to the common interests Iran and the US might have in Afghanistan and on other issues. In many ways, it might be like a couple that went through a bitter divorce 22+ years ago, and the recently had coffee together and shook hands in public. It is better than cold silence, but hardly reason for imagining wedding bells.

The only Iranian diplomatic office in the US is their representation to the UN in New York. People employed there are closely watched. An indication of this was when a group of diplomats associated with the Iranian delegation to the UN were caught videotaping sites in New York during June 2002. They were asked to leave the US. The Iranians were warned by the US not to be involved in such activities.

There has not been an Iranian embassy in Washington since 1979. There is an Iranian interest section in another country's embassy. One can be certain that the people who work there are under close scrutiny.

The building and physical assets of the former Iranian consulates in other parts of the US have been seized by the US government. Funds associated with the Iranian diplomatic presence have been frozen since 1979. There has been no recognized US "diplomatic" presence in Iran, outside of "Irangate" or the hostage negotiations, since 1979.

The Iranian government seized all US diplomatic properties in 1979. The former US embassy in Tehran is now an anti-American museum. The US interests section in Iran is found in the Swiss Embassy. This is where many Iranians signed the condolence book after 9-11.

There have been numerous court cases in the US, the EU and in Iran regarding disputes between the two countries, mostly involving money, contracts and damages. Many of these cases have been protracted and bitter, like US-Iran relations since 1979.

Iranian Perceptions of the US:

Iranians still hold the US responsible for the coup against PM Mossadegh in 1953 that reinstalled into power a shah that many of them did not like – and a shah who was brutal and, in their views, un-Islamic. There is a great deal of resentment still stewing in Iran on this issue. This history is important in Iran, but mostly for the older generation of former revolutionaries and hardliners.

Iranians also resent the sanctions imposed on them, and the strong attempts by the US to isolate them from the world. They also have a sense that the US robbed them of wealth and income, not only from the sanctions, but also by freezing Iranian assets – especially the assets of

the former shah. They are astonished that the US has expanded its own laws, like ILSA and others, to Iranian soil, and that Iran has lost its sovereign immunity in the courts of the US – as exemplified in the Flato case.

Many Iranians also see plots by the US behind many of their problems, although many of the youth seem to be getting beyond that. Even so, the US Congress approved \$20 million not long ago to engage in covert activities to either change the Iranian leadership, or to change the way Iran looked at the world. This was done in an extraordinarily public manner. It also fed the resentments and conspiracy theories in Iran.

The Iranian Maglis (parliament) soon after that allocated \$20 million to fight these covert activities. The recent crash of a US spy drone in Iran did not help matters.

Many Iranians also resent the fact that the US successfully blocked loans and other assistance from international organizations like the World Bank and the IMF until just recently, and that the US has been trying to block Iran's membership in the WTO. They see some of the attempts by PM Khatami to bring Iran back into the international system of trade and finance as being blocked by the US. (PM Rafsanjani started the opening up process after he was elected Prime Minister. He also had a difficult time with the US.)

The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) is an example they often present. However, ILSA has proven to be something of a paper tiger. The sanctions that it states will be imposed on non-US companies that invest more than \$20 million in Iran have been rarely imposed. Its intended purpose was to help cut off outside financial and other help to Iran to redevelop its oil, gas and other industries. The underlying purpose was also to cut off funding and economic development that Iran could use to export its revolution, and to engage in terrorist activities. However, there is

a part of ILSA that states that the sanctions can be waved for national security purposes. That seemed to be vague enough for Petronas, Total and others to be immune from such sanctions.

The increasingly warm relations between the EU, Russia, China, and others with Iran seem to be helping Iran go around many of the extraterritorial sanctions and laws imposed by the US. Such unilateral sanctions cannot work without some cooperation from third parties. Such cooperation seems to have been weakening over time. The recent spate of EU investments in Iran in various sectors of the Iranian economy points further to this fact.

There are some nonproliferation laws in the US as they apply to Iran. In these cases sanctions are almost always applied. This is likely because of the nature of the potential threats to the US and its interests that such investments or exports to Iran may help produce. Some Chinese companies were recently sanctioned by the US. But the US has been wary to sanction Russian companies, even though Russia is helping Iran build the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, and has recently agreed to help them build six other nuclear plants. Sometimes US relations with the countries where these firms reside trump the application of these extraterritorial laws and regulations.

The Iranians see the US as trying to interfere in Iran's relations with many other countries. Iran would like to be a regional power in Central Asia, Northwest Asia and the Gulf. They see US power slowly encircling them in, and they resent and fear it. They are angry over US efforts to block pipelines from the Central Asian states through Iran to ports and outlets in the Gulf and on to Pakistan and India and beyond. They also see the US trying to interfere in its relations with the EU (without much success), Russia, China, India, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and the many other countries that Iran has developed diplomatic and other relations with since 1979 – and especially since the election of PM Khatami in 1997.

Nevertheless, Iran has more diplomatic posts now than it did during the time of the Shah. Its relations with the EU and other US allies seem to be growing and warming—as its relations with the US seem to get worse and worse. Containment is a cup half empty. Nevertheless, many in Iran resent US hegemony in the region, US power worldwide, and US power targeting them.

Many of the more right wing elements in Iran think of the US as a monolith of western culture, which they, in turn, consider to be immoral and anti-Islamic. Many dislike the US for its seemingly unquestioning support for Israel. This is especially so during these most trying and brutal times.

There are holdover resentments about the US support for Iraq during the miserable 8-years war, in which Iran lost hundreds of thousands of people. During the war, its economy collapse, and its cities and all-important oil industry got severely damaged. The Iranian economy and society were seared by the war.

Many Iranians also hold resentments toward the US for the downing of the Iranian airliner by the Vincennes. They were livid when they heard the commanding officer of the Vincennes was later promoted. The fact that the US apologized to Iran, and compensated the families of the victims, does not seem to be enough to assuage some of the resentments and pain associated with this tragedy.

The Iranians were fairly quiet and acquiescent during the Gulf War of 1991, when Iraq was invaded by the US. Yet it seems to many of them that the US did not reward them for their neutrality.

The Iranians also resent the US for not putting some Iranian opposition groups on the US terrorist lists. They are angry at the US for putting the “freedom fighters” (from their perspective) of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine on those lists.

They are angered by the US interference in their development of nuclear power, missile programs and defense programs to defend their country in a region that is extremely dangerous and is nuclear. India, Pakistan and Israel are all nuclear powers. Many Iranians fault the US for interfering time and time again in its defense affairs.

It is clear from the data, that Iran has had a very strong increase in defense expenditures since 1996. They have also been developing missile systems with the help of North Korea and others. The US sees these developments as a significant threat. Many Iranians see this as the right of any sovereign state to defend itself. Some Iranians also mention that Israel is a nuclear power, but the US does not sanction them. They also find it curious how the sanctions imposed on Pakistan and India were taken off once it was clear that these two countries would help the US with the war on terrorism.

More than likely the Iranians asked for a similar reaction from the US when discussions were going on about what Iran might contribute to the Afghan war. Given the complexities of the legislative environment on Iran in the US, it would take extreme measures to significantly relax the sanctions against them. Also, there are not the long-term hardened resentments against the Pakistanis or the Indians that there are against the Iranians in the US. India and Pakistan are also not considered threats to Israel, like Iran is.

Iran got very little from the US, it seems, for the modicum of help it gave in the Afghan campaign of 2001-2002.

Many Iranians are also upset at what they see as US interference in many parts of the Islamic world, a world that some in Iran perceive to be within their spheres of influence. Many of the hardliners consider the US to be a crusading power and inherently anti-Islamic. Failures of the revolution, and there are many, are often blamed on the US and Israel, especially by the

hardliners. One can see that, for them, ideology and “Islamism” trump realpolitik. The reformers, as weak as they are, seem to be more progressive on this.

Many of the youth seem thoroughly fed up with the views of their leaders, and do not seem to support the overwhelming “Islamization” that imbues today’s Iran. It also seems that they would also like to see more jobs, better jobs, more housing, better housing, and more freedoms, rather than see Iran spending more money on external agendas⁵.

So after all of that: What are the Problems?

This brings us to an important set of points. Indeed there are reformers like PM Khatami and the great majority of the people in the Maglis. Many of these persons would like to see some improvement in Iran’s relations with the US, and to see Iran leave its partial isolation imposed on them by the US. However, the levers of real power when it comes to foreign affairs are in the office of the vilayet-I-faqi, commander and chief of the armed forces, and supreme leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khamenie. He has many times slammed the reformers for trying to improve relation with the US. He has the power to change laws, effectively impeach leaders and vet candidates for election. He has almost total control over the foreign relations of the country – even if PM Khatami has traveled to many countries and signed many agreements. The ultimate authority in Iran rests with the Supreme Leader. He has recently outlawed any public discussions about improving relations with the United States.

Both parties seem caught in the traps of past resentments and present day ideologies and prejudices. The structures of power in both countries seem to militate against any real opening up and warming of relations. On the Iranian side we have the hardliners, Ayatollah Khatamie, and the exclusionists in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and within the ulema.

On the US side we have the very powerful lobbyists, the conservative anti-Iranians, and others who wish to stop any improvement in relations even before it starts. Most of the power in Iran resides with the hardliners who think the US is mostly anti-Islam and anti-Iranian. Most of the power in the US on this issue resides with the anti-Iran lobbyists, and a Congress that often sees Iran as a monolithic threat to the US and its values. Both sides often fall into more ideological positions, rather than more pragmatic ones. Instead of focusing on the geopolitical, strategic and economics of each the arguments often fall into other categories.

Sometimes both sides fall into a simplistic reductionism about the other side. From that no progress can be made. Both Iran and the US are complex countries with many viewpoints, beliefs and opinions on issues related to US-Iranian relations. Opinions opposite to the current “political correctness” (as defined by those who have the real power on these issues) are often not given much weight in policy developments in both countries.

Since 1979, there have been some attempts by the US at improving US relations with Iran. Irangate is a notorious example that backfired. Madeline Albright’s talk in 1999 in response to PM Khatami’s call for a “dialogue of civilizations” in 1998 was an important speech. Her apology to Iran about 1953 was a giant step in the right direction. The cultural, educational and sports exchanges that occurred have helped to soften the huge wall of mistrust a little bit. The relaxation of the sanctions that allowed the export of medical and humanitarian goods from the US was a possible optimistic opening. The relaxation of import sanctions allowing in Iranian pistachios (but at a 370%+ tariff rate), rugs and a small number of other items was another cautious, but important, move.

Trade between the US and Iran is miniscule. The US exports about \$9 million of goods and imports from Iran about \$51 million. Compared to the \$10+ trillion US economy and the

\$100+ billion Iranian economy, these numbers are barely on the economic radar screen. US investment in Iran is pretty much nonexistent. US economic relations With Iran may be one of the most centrally planned, government-controlled economic relationships in the world. US firms have been harmed. Jobs have been lost. Some are wondering what the true benefits net of costs have been of “dual containment” and its successor policies.

Unfortunately, when the US government began overtures to Iran, almost always the hardliners in Iran seemed to have shut them down. It seems that the hardliners fear an improvement in relations with the US. What they say is that talk with the US is useless, and that all the US wants to do is dominate and control Iran. Reading between the lines one might see that projecting the United States as an enemy may be the hard-liners’ best way of staying in power.

The reformists on many occasions welcomed these attempts at improving relations. PM Khatami optimistically (overly it turns out) called for a “dialogue of civilizations” during a CNN interview soon after his election. He also has been traveling the world to open up new and better relations with the world. However, the hardliners like Ayatollah Khatemei (the “unelected few”) hold most of the keys to power, and hold almost all of the keys to foreign policy. Furthermore, in Iran any reformer going over the “red lines” when it comes to relations with the US might be ousted from office, and possibly imprisoned.

The hardliners control the judiciary and the Ministry of Intelligence. The Guardianship Council has also gotten involved in thwarting a warming of relations by bringing some reforms to a screeching halt, and by vetting certain candidates for office who might not be sufficiently Islamic (meaning, sometimes, that they are too open to the US). The Assembly of Experts, mostly controlled by the hardliners, also has on occasion done certain things to slow down or

stop any kind of detente. There are deep and simmering divisions between and amongst the reformers and hardliners on how to deal with the US.

Then again, when some persons in the US government have tried to relax the manifold, comprehensive and complex laws and regulations on Iran, the US hardliners have often stopped them. And the lobbyists have hammered them. There do not seem to be the deep and simmering divisions on Iran-US relations in the US. Most of the policy is developed by the hardliners, with considerably lobbying support. The “reformists” are often way out on the periphery. President Bush now seems to have given up (maybe) on the reformists in Iran and is now focusing on internal sources of change within Iran. The “reformists” in the US seem now, more than ever, on the outside.

There have been exceptionally and consistently hostile relations between the two countries, excepting a few rare occasions, since 1979. Diplomatic exchanges have been almost nonexistent. Official dialogues have been extremely rare. Internal debates have often been shut off in Iran, and redirected in the US.

Are there any Common Interests that could Lead to Enlightened Self-Interest?

Within all of these resentments, misunderstanding and hatreds there are some common interests that could lead to better relations. However, many of these common interests seem to be sacrificed to the altar of resentment, bitterness and misunderstanding.

First of all, the US and Iran had common interests in getting rid of the Taliban. It seems that Iran helped with some sharing of intelligence and by acquiescing to the US military and other activities in Afghanistan until the Taliban were ejected from power. Soon after, however, Iran became involved not in cooperation, but competition, for influence -- especially in western

Afghanistan. The US has been involved in civil affairs programs. Iran has been involved in building roads. Both countries have been vying for the hearts and minds of the people of western Afghanistan. There have been reports that Iran may be trying to destabilize parts of Afghanistan in order to make US influence in the country less easily won.

The US had obvious reasons to get rid of the Taliban after 9-11. Iran had many reasons to dislike the Taliban: the massacre of Shia near Herat, the killings of Iranian diplomats and journalists, and the general anti-Shia leanings of the Taliban. Iran also has interests in weakening Al-Qaeda. Many in Al-Qaeda are anti-Shia. However, Osama Bin Laden had made some ambiguous statements on the Shia. Once he called them “the only real Muslims”.

Many Al-Qaeda were arrested in Iran. This also tended to soften relations with the US a bit. However, it is still uncertain how many crossed the border and may be in Iran now, or may have used Iran as a transit spot to go elsewhere. In Washington this is a major question, and yet another reason for tensions between the two countries.

The recent turning over of 16 Al-Qaeda from Iran to Saudi Arabia has been a source of discomfort in Washington. It was further proof that some Al-Qaeda fighters were in Iran. Another view might be that this shows that Iran may be more willing to work together on the war on terrorism than some might think. Now, more than ever before this question is in the forefront of those who are looking at Iran for help in the war on terrorism. Those who are looking at Iran as an implacable enemy are also carefully observing what happened.

The border between Iran and Afghanistan is notoriously porous in places, and for a few tomen smugglers and others have been let through on many occasions. Bribery can work in other media of transport in other areas in and around Iran.

Iran did agree to help out US airmen if they got into trouble and landed in Iran. Iran was supporting the Northern Alliance for many years before the US decided to use them as the vanguard to oust the Taliban. Iran also expressed sympathy for what happened in the US on 9-11. However, Iran was not entirely supportive of the US attacks on Afghanistan.

After it was clear the Taliban were out, and as the new government of Afghanistan was being developed, Iran began to show that it was worried about an ostensibly pro-US government being set up in their neighbor. Iran has been also a bit nervous about US troops and bases being set up in Uzbekistan and other areas to its north. That sense of encirclement was getting stronger.

Iran and the US could also work together on the refugee issues that Iran faces. Iran for many years has been the host for the most refugees in any country. Most of these refugees, sometimes as high as 4.5 million, have been Afghans. The stability and redevelopment of Afghanistan can also be effected by whether these refugees return, how they return, how many return, and when they return. Many have already returned since the fall of the Taliban. Some still remain.

There are many Afghans in Iran who have never lived in any place but Iran. They have set up businesses there, work there, started families there, go to school there, and more. It may be to Iran's benefit to move many of them out. There are some indications that Iran is putting pressure on many of the refugees to leave. Iran is facing very high unemployment in its own people, a stagnant economy, and some civil unrest, especially amongst the youth who are finding it hard to find jobs and housing.

The US could benefit from the return and relatively greater prosperity of these refugees. Afghanistan could redevelop better. The US could have its example of semi-democracy and redevelopment of a former "Islamic" state to show the world. Although it is very clear that such

redevelopment could take decades. Both countries could benefit greatly from a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

Iran and the US could work together on narcotics trafficking issues. Afghanistan was for many years one of the largest sources of heroin in the world. A very large proportion of these drugs often went across into Iran on their way to the EU and beyond. The Iranians have made great progress in trying to stop the drugs trafficking. They have lost many police and soldiers in this battle. The US had recognized this by taking them off a list of countries that do not do enough to stop the drugs trade.

Iran also is facing what seems to be an increase in drug use and addiction. The US has had a major drugs problem for years. Both countries and their peoples could benefit with some cooperation on this issue. Iran is in an area that is a major drugs growing, processing and transport center. The US and Iran could also work together in helping to control the growing problem of organized crime in the region, and not just in drugs.

Iran and the US could also work together on energy projects. Central Asia is slowly coming on line as the next big producer of oil and natural gas. Iran wants to pipelines to go the shorter route through its territory to the Gulf and on to India, Pakistan and beyond. The US wants the pipelines to go in the other direction. So far it has been successful in getting its way, even if the pipelines through Iran would be cheaper to build. The US does not want the transport fees going to a country that it considers part of the “axis of evil”.

Its investors approved the pipeline from Baku to Tbilisi and then on to Ceyhan in Turkey. It will cost about \$2.6 billion, much more than a line going through Iran would cost. However, politics and national enmities have trumped economics in this case. The oil must flow, according to the US, but not through Iran.

The US and Iran could work together in trying to solve, or at least minimize, the tensions that exist between the West and the Islamic world. This could end up being the major issue of the first part of the 21st century.

There are persons on both sides of this issue that would like to see the tensions increase for their own benefits. The hardliners in Iran have their enemy to present to their people in order help them stay in power. The hardliners in the US also have their enemy to help them argue for bigger budgets, campaign contributions, and, frankly, to play upon the relative ignorance about Islam and Iran in the US.

Even after condemning terrorism, the hardliners in Iran want to present the “war on terrorism” that the US started after 9-11 as a war on Islam. It hardens their positions and grants them short-term power. Many of the reformers in Iran do not buy into this perspective. Many of the youth do not see it as the west against Islam. Extremists on both sides benefit from an increase in tensions between the two countries.

The US needs Muslim states to support in the war. The more it can be presented as threatening Islam rather than extremists, the more difficult this war could be.

Iran has sometimes supported in material, financial, and political ways Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other groups that have maximalist positions on the Arab-Israeli problem. Many in the US present Iran as being a major part of the problem. Indeed some “elements” in Iran have been feeding the fire and flames of the recent tragedies in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, one could also see the possibility that Iran could be part of the solution. Some in the US believe that if Iran could be convinced to stop supporting these groups, then there may be a better chance for peace. However, that seems unlikely. The Palestinian issue is a very hot one in Iran. It is also a very powerful issue throughout the region

and the entire Islamic world. Iran wants to play that card to get more support in its tensions with the US.

For the Iranians to back down from its support of these groups it may be required for the US to also be less supportive of Israel. That also seems highly unlikely given the current domestic political climate. So we see another issue where the two countries could work together, if it were not for the many other things that get in the way.

Iraq is yet another problem where these countries could work together. The Bush administration seems determined to oust Saddam Hussein. There have been some reports in early August 2002 that the US would like to talk with Iran about Iraq during the 6+2 discussions on Afghanistan. Iran might benefit from that given the history they have had with Saddam Hussein. However, recently some of the hardliners in Iran have been saying that the actual target of the US is Iran.

The Iranian have shown little resolve in helping with a regime change in Iraq. Most of the Arab states have also been wary of supporting regime change in Iraq, but for different reasons. It could in all likelihood be that the US will be pretty much alone in this venture (that is, if they do it), excepting the support of some small states in the Gulf. Iran could be a great supporter in the ousting of Saddam, but then other things are in the way. Some hardliners in Iran have stated that they wish to down US jets when they attack Iraq. US hardliners want to change the regime in Iran. Working together on Iraq seems like a stretch.

Furthermore, Iran does not want to be saddled with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees that might flee to Iran if a protracted war occurs. The Iranian economy and its territorial integrity could also be at risk if a protracted, nasty war breaks out. Investments may just dry up.

It is to the benefit of both parties to solve the Iraq situation – and quickly. Iran also understands that there will likely be residual violence associated with the 11 years of sanction placed on Iraq, and due to its devastating economic and social situation for many years to come. Iran could also benefit greatly from a stabilized and peaceful Iraq, but they are wary of a possible pro-American leadership getting into power in Iraq.

Turkey and the US have good relations. Turkey and Russia seem to be improving their relations. Russia and Iran seem to be developing a solid economic and diplomatic relationship. The US and Russia are now developing what seems to be an alliance on many issues, but there are still some tensions. Turkey and Iran seem to be developing a cautious, yet warming relationship. The Turks have signed a multibillion-dollar natural gas deal with Iran, based solely on pragmatic economic reasons it seems. Turkey needs the gas. Iran needs the customers. Turkey is a secular state made up mostly of Muslims. Iran is an Islamic state. Even Azerbaijan seems to be warming up to Iran. The Kurdish issue could be a key to a more stable region, or one that could be a political earthquake to split countries apart. The same could be said of Iraq, Tajikistan, the Caucasus, Afghanistan (it is not yet a stabilized and developing state), and then there is the set of issues related to India and Pakistan.

Iran is a crossroads connected politically, economically, diplomatically, culturally, militarily, and socially to many different regions. It is the most important state, in many ways, in the Gulf and in Central Asia.

Where Do We Stand Today?

The bottom line is that US-Iranian relations are much worse now than even before 9-11. The US administration sees Iran as part of an “axis of evil”. Some members of Congress are

calling for regime change in Iran, even the President hinted at US support for a regime change. The hardliners in Iran see the US as “evil” and intent on interfering in its internal affairs. In early August 2002 a few hardliners in Iran stated that they would like to shoot down US planes that are heading toward Iran during any attack on Iraq by the US. Some in Iran are convinced the real target of the US is Iran. Some in the US are saying that maybe we should attack Iran. These sorts of commentaries are not good for improving relations.

Each side has been roaming the world and visiting leaders in pursuit of its hardening agendas. Iran has been preemptively setting up a coalition of support with the EU, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, India and others. The US has been trying to set up an anti-Iranian coalition, but seems to be finding lots of dead-ends. The logic of US-Iranian relations is now one of confrontation in silence. This is a dangerous combination. The underlying question that needs to be answered might be: can both sides get beyond 444 and its corollaries to solve the issues related to 9-11?

* The opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent those of the National Defense University or any entity of the US Government. National Defense University, Washington, DC.

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NOTES

¹ There may be other things happening "behind the scenes" that we could hear about in many years. If there are such things, the author is not aware of them, and could not discuss them in any case.

² That is the Americans who care to even think about the issues of Iran, which really are not that many. There is a distinct sense of willing apathy on many things related to foreign affairs. Islam is often mixed up with Iran in the minds of many Americans. There is not only a great deal of misunderstanding about Iran in the US, but also Islam. That may be a part of the problems between the two countries.

³ See Katzman (1999)

⁴ See the Atlantic Council reports on Iran in 2001.

⁵ Iran's youth seem to be in a slow boil in their stagnating economy. However, the real power strings are held by the older generations, and mostly by the hardliners.

⁶ Given the size and nature of this paper not all of the issues could be discussed fully and in detail. One might want to take a look at this list as a suggested reading list for those who want to learn more about Iran, the US, and Iran-US relations.