

SEYED HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN

IRAN

AND THE

UNITED STATES

AN INSIDER'S VIEW ON THE FAILED PAST AND THE ROAD TO PEACE



FOREWORD BY AMBASSADOR THOMAS PICKERING

WITH SHAHIR SHAHIDSALESS

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Seyed Hossein Mousavian
with
Shahir ShahidSaless

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FOREWORD

Hossein Mousavian is a good friend and brings to this book a set of ideas and assessments worth considering even if we are not entirely in agreement. I met him some four years ago or more at a fascinating discussion which he details in the book regarding the Khobar Towers incident in Saudi Arabia. We met again at Princeton on several occasions and later attended conference meetings and platforms together.

We see eye to eye on many matters, particularly the critical importance of finding a way to get the US and Iran speaking together. Hossein's intellectual work during the last five years has been enormously valuable for senior American legislators and senior-level Washington executive branch leaders in gaining a better understanding of Iran. We have had the opportunity to discuss together and think through various approaches to the issue of bringing Iran and the US into closer contact and to finding answers to the matters that divide them, beginning with the nuclear issue.

While many have contributed to that process, it has been the unusual advantage of having Hossein here in the United States which has made its own, important and unique contribution to how Iran views the US. Hossein was able to present insights, points of view, historical details, and frank assessments from an Iranian point of view that helped to broaden horizons, inform policy-makers, and introduce new and useful ideas. Most importantly, he was able to convey thoughts about the Iranian cultural context and ways of thinking about the issues which definitively helped in closing the gap and opening the talks.

Iran-US relations have become the locus of perhaps the most important contribution to foreign affairs in this decade by both countries. The 34-year estrangement has been characterized by, indeed suffused with, mistrust and misunderstanding. Both countries in their own way play a special role in world affairs. Iran is a key regional power, major oil producer, and the leading Islamic state and the major Muslim power where Shia Islam predominates. The future of the Middle East is very much linked to Iran and its role, just as it is linked to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The United States is a major world power. Its security posture, economic strength, and traditional adherence to values and principles which have guided the country since 1776 are

all sources of global and regional influence. Both countries will play a critical role with others in the future of the Middle East.

This book tracks and amplifies the reasons just noted above as to how and why its author has played his own special role in Washington, New York, and in many other cities in this country and Europe in providing a greater understanding of Iran. An Iranian diplomat in Germany, a senior official in Tehran, and a leader in the revolutionary movement to inform and reform Iran, Hossein Mousavian deserves our attention to what he says on key issues. We will not agree with everything, but we should be aware of his views, take them into account, understand where we agree and disagree, and use that information to help shape a constructive path to the future with Iran.

In the few words to follow, I want to do several things to put this book in perspective and share with you some thoughts and ideas which might make going forward by our two countries more understandable and even possible. I've spent over a dozen years looking at the issues posed by the differences between the United States and others with Iran over its nuclear program and other issues. There are several conclusions one can draw that might help with building understanding and progress between Iran and the US.

Direct contacts between the parties to the issue and especially between the United States and Iran are essential. They were, in order to conclude the November 24, 2013 Joint Plan of Action (JPAG). They will be, to reach a conclusion to the current negotiations on a comprehensive agreement.

The parties are separated by over 30 years of mistrust, sporadic contact, and misunderstanding. This book, from the Iranian point of view, seeks to set that right. It is important to know how opposing sides view each other's ideas and intentions.

The reality is that no perfect agreement is achievable. However, the elements are in place to achieve an arrangement in which Iran can pursue a peaceful nuclear program and the US and others have more than reasonable confidence that the program is peaceful and civilian—that is, not being diverted to use in a nuclear weapon.

This takes place against a backdrop of deep suspicion on both sides arising out of the period of mistrust and misunderstanding; on the side of Iran, a sense that the objective is to effect regime change in their country. And there is evidence in the minds of Iranians for that view, as you will read in the pages ahead. On the other hand, a suspicion exists on the part of the United States, fed by some elements raised in the book, and which I will try to summarize, that Iran's real objective is to

construct a nuclear weapon. In part, both of these views are based on some “evidence”—the parties have not been scrupulous in eschewing misstatements and missteps—and in part based on, “that was what I would be doing if I were on the other side” kind of thinking and assessment.

At this stage, two conclusions seem to be possible with regard to this issue. First, the US (and Israeli) intelligence communities seem to agree, and the US has reported each year since 2007, that there has been no Iranian decision to make a nuclear weapon based on what it calls strong evidence. Second, it is clear that Iran has acted in ways that are likely to give it the technology, information, and hardware to proceed in that direction with some confidence should such a decision be made.

Let me now write a word or two now about how I interpret the book and its messages. Mousavian has done a good job in blending what he knows and understands from long service with his government. And he has done so in a way that is in accordance with what he has learned in over four years in the United States at Princeton University and well beyond that about US ideas and attitudes toward Iran and its nuclear program.

Diplomats get paid as much to listen as to talk. It is the essence of their profession to understand what the other side is saying and how that informs their task of getting a resolution to problems and disputes. Listening is thus essential and in my view ought to consume well over a majority of a diplomat’s time interacting with others at home and abroad. This book is first and foremost a good volume for listening to the writer and understanding his views and most importantly what he has to say about Iran, its attitudes, and how they have been shaped by the interactions, good and bad, with the US and others.

But listening is a complicated affair. In the first instance, it involves understanding what is being said clearly and directly. But even more importantly—and this is where skill and experience comes in—it means trying to understand what is really meant by the words you are hearing or reading. In some instances, that is not always the same thing. Often, those involved in negotiations have settled on what they believe is the best explanation of their views and approach. But behind it, with careful analysis, it is possible to predict what the underlying objectives are and how one might use that understanding to find an approach that can lead to mutual understanding and eventually to agreement.

In part, what Mousavian has written for us raises that challenge clearly and I leave it to the reader to understand the challenge and to

make her or his own judgments. To say that I do not agree with all that is set down is true. But to say also that what is set down is essential for understanding both how Iranians see the issue and therefore for understanding how it might be dealt with is also critical.

There are in looking at this issue several current conundrums which I believe are worth considering as we contemplate, Iran and the United States, how to move ahead together for the future both on the nuclear issue and beyond.

Fundamental to understanding the issue is a difference of view I detect over the interpretation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1966.

On the Iranian side, the view appears to be that the treaty permits and even authorizes any action which does not result in the diversion of nuclear material to a nuclear weapon. That is a view quite broadly shared by a number of states, but often if not exclusively based on the argument that the action being taken—especially in sensitive or dual use technologies (enrichment and reprocessing)—is justified by a civilian or permitted non-weapons purpose. Examples include the production of highly enriched uranium for use in research reactors (now thankfully very largely if not completely abandoned) or for use in naval propulsion reactors. A more dangerous example in my view is the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel to separate the plutonium produced in that fuel. The argument goes that this is not only an excellent way to reduce the total amount of dangerous material in spent fuel from a safety and even non-proliferation point of view, but also allows fuel to be burned in reactors as a mixed oxide fuel and its “fuel value” extracted. The truth is that the environmental argument can be satisfied in a much less dangerous way—long-term underground storage—and that the fuel costs are so expensive in its preparation as to make it non-competitive for the long-term future with low enriched uranium (LEU) for the same purpose. And LEU poses little or no proliferation risk.

On the other side of the ledger is the requirement, happily agreed to in the Joint Plan of Action, that a peaceful civilian program will be jointly reviewed and agreed by Iran and its negotiating parties and become the basis for defining an ongoing Iranian program. Thus, what does not serve or establish a peaceful program does not meet the strictures of the treaty, a view clearly implied in the first approach to this issue (outlined in the preceding paragraph) and which clearly fits the view that if it isn't a part of a peaceful program then it doesn't fit the treaty in intent or specificity. This issue will continue to be a part of the

underlying differences, but to a degree that it can be reconciled, it will help reach an overall rapprochement.

A second issue has to do with the tactical approach of dealing with parts of the negotiations in this context. The US has taken the view that in an outcome which permits some enrichment (and no reprocessing), the best goal is to secure the longest possible time between any possible future decision to “break out” of the civilian program and go for a nuclear weapon. The JPAG arguably achieved a part of that purpose in enlarging the time period from a matter of some 4–6 weeks to some 3–4 months to produce in Iran a significant quantity of highly enriched uranium (for a weapon). The time periods will be disputed, but the rough proportions are right.

Iran takes the view that this is not their negotiating objective and they have not accepted that approach. They have said they believe that a program with limits defined by agreement on the size of a civil program now and for the life of a comprehensive agreement, buttressed by robust inspections and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency of the United Nations (IAEA), which they say in principle, they are ready to accept, is the basis for going ahead.

There should be a path to agreement here if both sides, as I believe they are, are now serious about finding a common approach. What motivates the approach for success is how well we can accord our approach on break out time with the Iranian acceptance of a limited program of enrichment in quantity and quality defined by civil needs and purposes and robustly inspected by the IAEA.

A third issue also lies out on the horizon which ought to be looked at carefully and constructively. Iran, for reasons of pride in its success in its program and perhaps for other reasons, has, in connection with limitations on its enrichment program, taken a strong position that it is not willing to destroy centrifuges and associated equipment in that program. While from my perspective that approach would represent a better and more secure way to proceed, it can also be looked at in perhaps a different but analogous context. Such equipment could be stored, mothballed, or disconnected in ways that would meet the objectives of the negotiations from both sides—a program limited to civil needs on the Iranian side, and with increased time to break out on the US side. Similarly, proposals to convert the underground Fordow site to R and D purposes might also serve the same purpose.

Looking ahead to what would happen should a breakout be seen to be occurring is a problem unlikely to have to be addressed in an agreement. Also, it would seem likely and useful that extended time

would provide an longer time for the use of non-military measures to resolve any such issue should it occur.

While nuclear questions are at the heart of present differences with Iran, they are not the only issues that need to be addressed. Both sides have agreed to keep the nuclear issue at the center of the current negotiations for a comprehensive agreement. But at some point in the future, other questions, as noted in this book, will also have to be considered if the nuclear talks are successful.

Among them are regional questions. These include Afghanistan, where there are shared views. Both sides oppose the Taliban, and see a need to recognize the role of all groups, including the Shia Hazara. They both seek a sovereign, united, and independent Afghanistan at peace with its neighbors and playing a constructive role in the region. Similar views are shared on Iraq, but with potential differences over the degree to which the rights of the Sunni and Kurdish minorities should and have to be accommodated. Syria represents a wider gulf, but even here both agree that Sunni, fundamentalist, terrorist organizations pose a threat to the future of Syria and the region.

Beyond these, there are other questions which must be addressed: regime change; the Mossadegh overthrow; the regional role of Iran; how to deal with the USS *Vincennes*' shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988; the US hostage-taking; funds left over from the Shah's regime in US hands; and how and in what fashion, if things proceed well, the US and Iran might find a path to closer contacts and eventual resumption of full diplomatic relations.

As an American negotiator, it is my experience that quite often negotiating with Washington and its friends and allies consumed more of my time than negotiating with the other parties at the table. This is no doubt part of the US approach to with Iran. While I cannot speak for the Iranian side, this book shows evidence of their having the same problem.

One issue which has now reached prominence is the question of the level of enrichment which Iran might pursue in its future, peaceful, civil program. Much ink has been spilled and many words exchanged over this issue. Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, some of our key Arab friends, and a significant group in the US Congress have all engaged in that discussion and have concluded in favor of "zero enrichment."

Most, if not all, of those who have engaged in this process believe that "zero" would be a preferable course. But a number also believe that given Iran's commitment and expenditure on their program of

enrichment, no combination of leverage and pressure over time will achieve the zero goal. They also make the case that limited enrichment under inspection would be an acceptable approach in terms of getting a good overall agreement.

But it is not really enough to assert that the idea is not acceptable and cannot be negotiated without looking more carefully at some of the key reasons. One of those is that once achieved, mastery of enrichment is not something that can be taken out of the heads and experience of Iranian scientists and technicians. So zero, in terms of hardware and operation, while desirable, is not a complete answer. That means that two things might take place. First, it is unlikely that it will be possible to achieve zero, and one possible requirement in getting there which we cannot accept might be less stringent inspection—IAEA standard safeguard procedures unenhanced by the Additional Protocol which allows for inspections on a broader, more comprehensive basis. That would be a poor bargain. Under those circumstances, Iran might choose or be driven toward a clandestine program—there has been evidence of this in the past. (Indeed as far as we know, all such efforts have been discovered well in advance of their being declared by Iran. And that fact would have to be factored into a risk of discovery by Iran with all the consequences of such an action). Second, it would also be true that without an ongoing monitoring program, such a clandestine approach might be more difficult to detect, because there would be next to no possibility of the transfer of people, information, or equipment from an overt program to a clandestine one without being seen.

It will be important to do all that can be done through inspection and monitoring to deter any such efforts to go “underground” literally and figuratively. Unilateral intelligence, national Technical Means in US–Soviet parlance, can also enhance the uncertainty regarding discovery for any party wishing to try to go the clandestine route.

Further, it may be valuable to look at multilateralizing any enrichment operation in Iran. On the one hand, a number of regional countries might want to consider this both as a potential additional deterrent to a rapid breakout by promoting transparency, and on the other hand, as a source for fuel for research and similar-type reactors. Large investors over time might also find this prospect of interest.

We are presented with a unique gift in Mousavian’s thorough examination of this issue from his perspective. This is a gift of greater

understanding and of a significant opportunity to find a positive result in the negotiations which lie ahead.

Iran–US relations will play a huge role in the future of the Middle East. There will need to be a clear understanding with our friends and allies as we proceed. Many of these remain concerned that the United States, by engaging Iran, is somehow dedicated to turning the careful balance in the region on its head. They too have differences and problems with Iran, some in a theological context, some in a historical context. The truth is that the United States does not wish or is able to change essential balances in the region—and the region these days already presents us with numerous challenges in this regard, following the shifts in Egypt and Syria to mention only a few.

The immediate purpose with Iran is to avoid a nuclear arms threat in the region and the potential for a nuclear arms race that such a development might engender. A solid agreement with Iran, carefully limited and monitored, but respectful on both sides of a civil program, could be a model and not a threat, and indeed represent progress rather than disruption. And it is for the government and people of this region to determine their future relations within the region. Those organizations already functioning among them could well be the basis for their future relations and the United States should, and I feel confident will, support a balanced, equitable, and peaceful future for the Middle East. It is in our national interest to do so. It is clearly the desire of those in the region. Words are important in reaching such arrangements, but even more so, actions are essential. The right actions can help condition the disappearance of misunderstanding and build a barrier to continued mistrust.

The answers on the nuclear question, if they come, will open the door to greater possibilities for agreement on the many issues which still divide us, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Syria, where is more than a modicum of overlap in our national interests. And while that is beyond the scope of the present volume, it is prefigured by its helpful aspects.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to write this foreword.

Ambassador Thomas Pickering

INTRODUCTION

Filling the Gap

After studying as an undergraduate in the United States, I returned to Iran in 1979 during the upheavals of the revolution. At its victorious conclusion, I joined the new revolutionary government where I remained engaged for three decades in varying official positions working on foreign, security, and domestic policies. This remarkable experience exposed me first-hand to knowledge of the challenges faced by Iran's foreign policy. At the heart of those challenges was conflict between Iran and the West, but more specifically, Iran and the US.

I finally came back to the US in 2009 and began my postdoctoral research career at Princeton University. This new chapter in my life provided opportunities for me to meet hundreds of American and European current and former foreign policy experts and journalists. I worked with the think tanks in the US, the EU, Asia, and the Middle East. Moreover, at Princeton I had the opportunity to engage in Track II diplomacy between Iran and the US, conducting a tremendous amount of work aimed at resolving the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, and ultimately reconciliation between Iran and the US. The conflict has had an important impact on the region and the world's peace and stability. Due to the uncompromising stance between the two states, this struggle could spiral out of control and wind up in a military confrontation, potentially endangering many lives. Additionally, its economic consequences, such as a likely rise of energy costs, could affect millions of lives around the world.

The tenor of Iran-US relations has a tremendous impact on numerous key issues in the Middle East region: the stability of the Persian Gulf, and thus the security of energy; the future of extremism in the region and throughout the world; the fate of the Arab Awakening; the destiny of a Middle East that is free from weapons of mass destruction;

the Israeli–Palestinian peace process; and weak states such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria.

The stability and peace in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is crucial to the entire world, including the West. If the current crisis in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria spiral into total chaos, forfeiting command and control to the unorganized masses, regional and international terrorist organizations are likely to take up residence within their borders. The geography of this region also lends itself to organized crime, serving as a major route for drug trafficking to the West via Turkey and Central Asian countries. Without governance, the region is also primed for the production of drugs. Moreover, chaos, sectarian war, and civil war may spill over into the neighboring countries and destabilize them, thus widening terrorism and organized crime even further.

Numerous books have been written by Western experts, mainly American, looking at the root causes of the conflict between Iran and the US. However, none of them has presented an immediate look at this complex relationship from within Iranian culture, society, and, most importantly, the Iranian policy-making system. This gap has been the cause of misanalysis, followed by the adoption of US establishment policies that have failed to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, these policies have elevated hostilities between the two countries while creating and perpetuating a state of non-compromise between them. This is the gap that this book intends to fill. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once remarked,

I think ... [Iran is] a very opaque place and it's a political system I don't understand very well ... And I'll just say one thing, one of the downsides of not having been in Iran ... is that we don't really have people who know Iran inside our own system ... So that's a problem for us ...¹

Western views on the Iran–US conflict will be discussed in this book, but the intention is not to offer equal attention to both sides of the conflict. The primary purpose of this book is to shed light on the Iranian side of the story which is hardly covered in the West in order to bring better understanding, thus paving the road to resolving this conflict.

Having served for almost three decades within the Iranian political system, I have pooled my experience and knowledge in search of an answer to the central question of why Iran and the US remain unable to reach a stable compromise. This impasse has existed since the

Iranian revolution, despite numerous opportunities for both countries to resolve the conflict, including several attempts at rapprochement. Yet, the fact that the two states, under the tenure of every president of the United States, have pursued reconciliation suggests that the desire for better relations has always existed. This fact has inspired me to write this book, hoping that better understanding of Iran's politics and society would contribute to the actualization of the two nations' aspirations to restore friendship.

Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst and Iran expert, and Ray Takeyh, a former State Department official and advisor on Iran issues, admit that "it [is] exceptionally difficult for outsiders to perceive Iranian motives and intentions ... the best that outside observers can do is guess at Tehran's motives."² In this respect, Hamilton Jordan, the Chief of Staff to President Jimmy Carter raises a valid question. Writing about the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran followed by the Iranian hostage crisis, he posited, "we didn't understand that country and its people. How in the world do you negotiate under those circumstances?"³

The good news is that for the first time since the Iranian Revolution, Iran and the US have conducted meaningful talks and reached an interim agreement over Iran's nuclear crisis in November 2013. However, caution should be exercised since until the final agreement is reached, there are many hurdles to jump and as a friend and expert said, "The road to a final settlement is long and rocky."

Being engaged over four years with US foreign and domestic policy experts, I now realize that we, Iranians, also misread the American political system. Like Americans, we are also heavily influenced by our perceptions, misperceptions, and biases. Consequently, we place too much importance on statements by American officials, which lend themselves to further intensification of the conflict. Many Iranian decision-makers are not familiar with Western culture. This is a mirror image of the situation in the United States, where many American Congressmen have not visited any foreign country, and even boast that they have no passport.⁴ This has sometimes caused major problems in the Iranian understanding of US push-and-pull policies. In fact, the breakthrough in Iran's nuclear dossier in 2013 is due partly to a better understanding in Tehran and Washington, perhaps due to forces on both sides: in the US, the combination of Obama, Kerry, and Hagel and their "engagement policy"; in Iran, the new president, Hassan Rouhani, elected in June 2013, who is a cleric that studied in the seminaries of Qom, as well as a UK PhD graduate, his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, a

US PhD graduate and the head of the Atomic Energy organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, a US PhD graduate.

Nevertheless, the majority of Iranian policy-makers become confused by contradictory statements from the Obama administration on the one hand, and from the US Congress on the other. They do not see that there is infighting and disagreement within the US government on their foreign policy, just as there is in Iran. They view it as a clear manifestation of hypocrisy and duplicity. The Iranian leadership views these contradictions, at best, as signs of a plausible explanation as the US government playing a game of good cop, bad cop.

It is noteworthy that even proponents of realist theory in international relations who view the international system as anarchic, in a state of constant antagonism and struggle for survival, do not rule out minimal cooperation between competing states, as was the case during the Cold War era. Nevertheless, in the case of Iran and the US, there have only been a few piecemeal deals and short-lived periods of cooperation followed by a renewed hostile posture toward each other. In other words, the dominant characteristic of their relationship has been one of non-compromise.⁵ Even during the Cold War, the state of relations was not so poor. At that time, the US maintained diplomatic relations with the USSR and its allies in the communist bloc, despite fierce disagreements between them, and ultimately, diplomacy was successful.

Points of Contention

The conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the US is complex. From the American perspective, the major dimensions of conflict include: Iran's provoking anti-Americanism; the potential export of the revolution in one of the most important geostrategic regions of the world (given its huge energy resources, amongst other things); Iran's potential threat to the Arab-Israeli peace process and security of Israel; its nuclear program; its role in terrorism; and its violation of human rights.

The major dimensions of the conflict identified from the Iranian perspective include: the adoption of a humiliating approach toward Iran including the language of threat and intimidation; the US regional hegemony and denial of Iran's role as a regional power; ignoring Iran's interest in the region; and, orchestrating international, multilateral, and unilateral coercive policies against Iran.

The Conflict as seen from Tehran

In Iran, there are mainly three schools of thought on the Iran–US conflict. All three share two key grievances: first, that the US does not respect the Islamic identity of Iran; and second, that the US has constantly interfered in Iran’s affairs and wielded any instrument at its disposal to harm the Iranian government. Nevertheless, the three schools depart from each other over whether or not this US perspective may be altered.

The first school, most notably subscribed to by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, maintains that the US is addicted to hegemonic status. This school of thought believes that because Iran’s Islamic establishment rejects foreign domination, the US seeks regime change in an effort to establish a puppet state and exploit Iran’s natural resources.⁶

This school of thought neither categorically rejects dialogue with the US nor having a healthy relationship. It is *pessimistic* about the prospects of the formation of a relationship based on an equal footing, non-interference, common interests, and mutual respect. In March 2013, Ayatollah Khamenei opined that he is “not opposed” to direct talks with the United States—although he remarked that he is “not optimistic,” either.⁷

The second current of thinking, advocated by the radical right and left, asserts that there is inherent antagonism between Iran and the US. The ultra-right focuses on the deep contrast between the Islamic and Western values, while the ultra-left emphasis is on the clash between Iran’s desire for independence and what they call the imperialist nature of the US. The ultra-left was the dominant current in the first decade after the revolution, and the ultra-right emerged after the end of Iran–Iraq War. While the ultra-left has almost disappeared, the ultra-right (i.e. “hardliners” in this book) has remained a relevant political force, although they are not big in terms of the number of followers.

The ultra-right argues not only that reconciliation is impossible between Iran and the US, but, more importantly, that reconciliation would conflict with Islamic values. In their view, negotiation with the United States must be considered as the red line. Even the United States’ repeated demands for Iran to “change its behavior” are interpreted as a prelude for stripping Iran of its Islamic identity and, more importantly, de-escalating Iran’s position as the spearhead of the war against “global arrogance” led by the United States. Hossein Shariatmadari, the chief

editor of the daily newspaper *Kayhan* and a staunch proponent of this school of thought, views any talks with the US as “a huge strategic mistake.”⁸ “Talking to America,” he states, “is [tantamount to] shaking hands with the devil and dancing with the wolves.”⁹

The third school of thought, represented by Iran’s former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, agrees with the notion that the American system, if it can, will harm Iran’s Islamic establishment. However, they remain optimistic about altering the US perspective, as well as the possibility of achieving normalization in relations while protecting Iran’s national interests. This school of thought is prepared for serious and comprehensive efforts for maximum engagement with the United States based on mutual respect, non-interference, and advancing mutual interests as the best way to serve the national interest of Iran. The group, described as “centrist,” “moderate,” and “pragmatist,” supports a free market economy and favors privatization of state-owned industries. Proponents of this third school of thought intend to invest in common interests between Iran and the US.

They assert that a negotiation-based resolution can be a win-win situation that offers huge rewards for both countries. They also assert that negotiations between Iran and the US can minimize or eliminate serious threats to both countries which originate from each other’s policies, as well as from external forces such as Salafi extremists.

Since the conclusion of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, the first and third schools of thought have vacillated between cooperation and rejection, while the second has relentlessly sought to prevent the formation of relations between Iran and the US.

Elements Obstructing the Formation of Meaningful Dialogue and Easing Tensions

Mistrust: Widely discussed, but ignored in practice

Material factors such as competition over power and interests play a major role in the conflict. However, a sense of profound mistrust is largely responsible for the longevity of deadlock, as well as perpetuation of the hostile, often uncompromising relationship between the two states. The mistrust has now gained an independent life in the relationship between Iran and the US, almost detached from competition over power and interests.

Mistrust has been one of the major reasons Iranians shy away from engaging in lasting dialogue and negotiations with the US. They fear deception and humiliation by what they perceive as a powerful propaganda machine, without any opportunity to defend itself or confront such propaganda on an equal footing. Ostensibly, in the absence of enduring dialogue, it is illogical to expect a negotiated solution. Most destructively, mistrust has obstructed the formation of meaningful and sustainable talks.

Iranians initially lost trust in the US after its admitted role in the 1953 coup d'état which overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran's popular, democratically-elected prime minister. For the following 25 years, the US supported the Shah and supported Iraq's invasion of Iran (1980–8).

The US mistrust of Iran began in 1979 with the seizure of their embassy in Tehran by radical students followed by 52 Americans being held hostage for 444 days. The mutual mistrust has reached the level of dogma. This has elevated the entangled narrative to such a degree that each government has tried to justify destructive policies toward the other in efforts to cripple capabilities and inflict harm.

This mutual mistrust stems from the US treatment of and policies toward Iran, and from Iran's behavior and its reactions to those policies. Surprisingly, many American experts and policy-makers admit that mistrust largely affects Iran–US relations, yet the policies that they propose or adopt only serve to intensify the mistrust between the two states.

Regime change policy

The “regime change” policy of the US, as perceived by all of the Iranian politicians and policy-makers across the political spectrum, is the primary factor that continually fuels the high level of mistrust toward the US, and rejection of any compromise. There is a cornucopia of offenses to choose from: paralyzing economic sanctions; allocating budgets under the banner of supporting freedom in Iran;¹⁰ covert operations to create chaos in Iran;¹¹ CIA activities inside the country;¹² including Iran in the “axis of evil”; clear rejection of security guarantees to Iran,¹³ and more. Iranians view all of these as clear signs pointing to regime change. President Obama's statement that he would “never take military action off the table,”¹⁴ coupled with the toughest sanctions in the last three decades imposed during his presidency, have convinced Iranians that, despite the change in leadership, the same regime-change

doctrine is in motion. Major changes, both in Iran's and the US's foreign policy during the latter part of 2013 had engendered hope that there might be "a crack in the wall of mistrust."¹⁵

Misperceptions and misanalysis

Misperceptions of the two countries' policy-makers have undoubtedly contributed to the failure of policies and initiatives aimed at détente between them, resolving the two countries' conflict over Iran's nuclear issue, and most importantly, establishing a meaningful dialogue between the two governments.

James L. Richardson, an international relations expert, offered a definition for misperception as "faulty, inaccurate or incorrect perception of a situation: it is perceived to have characteristics which are not present, or which are present to a significantly lesser or greater extent than perceived."¹⁶ This definition is useful because, as will be discussed in this book, numerous positions and policies adopted by the two states that are largely responsible for the perpetuation of the conflict are based on miscalculations, and misanalysis of the situation.

Outstanding among misperceptions of American policy-makers as well as misanalysis by the analysts is the use of "coercive diplomacy" to change the behavior of the Iranian government. To fulfill this objective, the US "is committed to a dual-track policy of applying pressure in pursuit of constructive engagement, and a negotiated solution."¹⁷ Sanctions are central to this dual-track diplomacy. The language of intimidation and threat of military action under the mantra of "all options are on the table" is also part of US coercive diplomacy. Isolation, both regionally and internationally, is another element of US's coercive policy toward Iran. This book broadly assesses these "coercive policies" and why they have failed and will continue to fail. These policies are based on the flawed premise that Iran will surrender to pressure. American policy-makers entirely ignore the pervasive role of "pride" in Iran's politics. Hassan Rouhani, during his swearing-in ceremonies, repeated this major but constantly ignored demand by Iranians: "I say this straightforwardly. If you seek a suitable answer, speak to Iran through the language of respect, not through the language of sanctions."¹⁸

For better or worse, Iranians are a proud nation. This characteristic has roots in Iran's long history of civilization. Pride and national pride are ubiquitous in Iranian culture and discourse. The notion of pride is

linked to empowerment rather than submission. That is the reason Iran fiercely resists coercive policies, particularly the sanctions.

John Limbert, former Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of Iranian affairs at the State Department during 2009–10, explains the weakness in this US approach as follows: “Since 1979 ... [w]e’ve used sanctions against Iran. They’re something we know. They’re something with which we have experience ... [But] changing the unproductive relationship that we’ve had with Iran for the last 30 years [is something] that we do not know how to do. That’s hard.”¹⁹

The risk of misperceiving that coercion will eventually work is that at some point, Iran’s patience may wane to the point of abandoning its rationality, and responding to those US pressures in a hostile manner. This would most likely lead to a destructive war.

Some may argue that sanctions encouraged Iran to return to the negotiation table in late 2013. This assertion is wrong. The realization of an interim agreement in November 2013 was the will of Iran’s new moderate administration seeking rapprochement with the West, in particular the US, its neighbors, and the rest of the world. In addition, it reflected the change of the US position toward Iran’s nuclear program from “no enrichment of uranium” to “no nuclear bomb.” Iran has not left the negotiating table since talks began in 2003, even during the tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While I was a member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005, Iran had not been faced by crippling sanctions, yet in March 2005, Iran suggested measures similar to those stipulated in the November 2013 interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1, to ensure that the country would not divert its nuclear program toward weaponization. The 2005 talks failed because, as I was told by the European negotiators, the US position was “zero enrichment” in Iran. This claim is verifiable. If the US goes back to similar approach of “no enrichment in Iran”, it would be unlikely to reach a settlement on the nuclear issue, despite the imposition of paralyzing sanctions.

Domestic political struggles

Domestic political struggles in Tehran and Washington have repeatedly undercut efforts for engagement. One of the main problems with Iran–US rapprochement is the lack of consensus for a genuine engagement in both capitals. Since the 1979 Revolution, neither the US nor Iranian administrations have released any realistic study on the balance of costs and benefits of rapprochement.²⁰ Instead, both capitals’ political systems have been locked in a Cold War model. It has been constant

pull and push on both sides. In other words, there has been no real, strategic foreign policy. It has dominantly been domestic politics that seems to determine foreign policies toward one another.

Spoilers

Last but not least, spoilers have played a major role in blocking diplomatic efforts, not only for rapprochement, but even for cooperation on issues of common interest. Hardliners, in Iran, the United States, and Israel, as well as some Arab countries in the region and the terrorist group Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK²¹), have constantly sabotaged the relations between the two states. We observe a pattern of intensification of efforts to neutralize attempts at reconciliation between Iran and the US right at the very moments when hopes for an improvement in relations appear on the horizon. The harsh reactions of the Israeli government, including warnings of military action, and the pro-Israel lobbying group, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), urging the Congress to pass a new sanctions bill after the interim Geneva agreement to Iran's nuclear program was signed between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in November 2013, are clear examples of such efforts.

Structure of this Book

Iran and The United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace is structured chronologically. It analyzes the key events and personnel that have shaped the hostile Iran-US relationship as well as describing the conflict between the states as viewed from Tehran. The book demonstrates the influence of psychological and cultural factors on the Iranian mindset. These factors have remained opaque to the analysts and policy-makers of the US who advocate reconciliatory solutions, but as is customary, focus merely on economic and political tradeoffs. Based on its findings, the book offers a realistic and feasible road map to peace to address not only substantive but also cultural-psychological factors.

The first chapter is a condensed review of three very different periods in the shared history of these two states. Without any knowledge of the actual history of relations between the two nations, one could believe that the United States and Iran have, from the outset, been locked in disputes.

The second chapter reveals how profound mistrust and misperceptions on both sides shaped the hostage crisis, with effects that few could have imagined would be so long lasting. The significance of the hostage crisis lies in the fact that it marks the big bang, the beginning of time in the hostile relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Identifying the root causes of the hostage crisis leads us to understand the underlying causes of both the formation and perpetuation of the conflict between Iran and the US. This is because many of today's points of contention between Iran and the US either did not exist or were insignificant at that time. There was no competition over hegemony in the region between the two countries, cultural differences had not emerged, the issue of Israel was a non-factor, and there was no dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Chapter 3's focus is on Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1989, although it also addresses other events such as the bombing of the Islamic Republic Party's headquarters and attempts on my life.

US aid to Saddam, which is detailed in this chapter, and the US's absolute silence after Iraq's criminal use of chemical weapons against the Iranians solidified hatred toward the US in the Iranian power elite. The leadership embraced the belief that the US, no matter the cost, was determined to change the Iranian *nezam* (political establishment).

The strategic thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, was that the war would end only when the "heretic" Saddam was overthrown. Ayatollah Khomeini viewed Saddam as a permanent threat to the whole region that had to be rooted out. To achieve this, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) prepared a plan. However, some high-ranking figures, despite the objection of many politicians, finally convinced the leader of the Iranian Revolution to accept a ceasefire and end the war. While Tehran defeated Saddam's plan to disembody Iran and bring about a regime change, it failed to remove the aggressor. What Ayatollah Khomeini considered as "drinking [a] chalice of poison" and the developments up to the acceptance of the ceasefire are explicated in this chapter.

Chapter 4 discusses the eight-year presidency of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani, a pragmatic centrist and moderate conservative, took office in 1989. He sought economic development through the free market model, active and productive relations with the West, and the reestablishment of relations with the US. Rafsanjani sought to use Germany as a doorway to implementing full diplomatic and economic relations with Europe and détente and normalization

with the US. My mission as Iran's ambassador to Germany was to help actualize these objectives.

However, due to the lack of reciprocation by the West toward the Iranians' overtures, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, supported a less flexible stance. Thus emerged the thesis of "the West minus the United States." This heralded the emergence of two distinctive schools of thought in the *nezam* which have endured for the last 25 years.

From high hopes to total disappointment, the chapter tells how Rafsanjani's plans and my efforts for positive interactions with the West ended in failure. We see how terror events, broken promises, and policies based on misperceptions and misanalyses all contributed to Rafsanjani's failure in his efforts at closing the gap between Iran and the United States.

The eight-year presidency of the reformist Mohammad Khatami is explained and analyzed in Chapter 5. By highlighting some unprecedented attempts at rapprochement proposed from both sides and extraordinary cases of cooperation between the two governments, the chapter reveals how perceptions, misperceptions and misanalysis ultimately blocked the success of those efforts.

Through spotlighting some major developments of this period, the dynamics of Iran's foreign policy decision-making are decoded. Contrary to the Western vision, the Supreme Leader's will is not the only force that determines the tenor and direction of foreign policy. He constantly monitors the two opposing camps and then decides. In this chapter, based on my knowledge of Ayatollah Khamenei's mindset, I answer the key question: "Why does Ayatollah Khamenei oppose renewing the relationship with the United States?"

The revelation of Iran's nuclear program escalated the Iran-US conflict to new heights. As the former spokesman of Iran's negotiating team, I provide an insight into the developments, debates, and visions within and outside the government of Iran. I demonstrate the hidden but significant role of the US in the failure of the negotiations between the moderate administration of Khatami and the Europeans.

A factional struggle between moderates and radicals dating back to the late 1980s led to the emergence of Ahmadinejad followed by the radicalization of the government after 16 years of the moderates' rule. In Chapter 6, the causes of this transformation are reviewed. However, the aggressive policies of the George W. Bush administration were arguably the decisive factor in the rise of radicalism in Iran.

The straw that broke the camel's back, was the failure of the West

to accept Khatami's moderate team's attempt to secure Iran's nuclear program. This, as I was informed by the Europeans, was directly linked to the US behind-the-scene activities.

Chapter 6 also discusses the conflict at the intersection of Ahmadinejad and the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Obama's election gave hope for change in US offensive policies toward Iran. The chapter illustrates why Obama's rapprochement failed. In the aftermath of Iran's 2009 disputed presidential election, due to the lack of knowledge about Iran's politics and misanalysis of the situation in Iran, thus overestimating the power and misreading the nature of the so-called Green Movement, by both American policy-makers and analysts alike, the Obama administration suddenly adopted extremely coercive policies intended to either change the behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran or to bring about regime change.

A host of other issues, such as the cost of ignorance as well as miscalculations on the part of the Iranians, and the reasons why Iran's position was strengthened in Iraq during Ahmadinejad's presidency, are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 7 explores the major issues of the conflict between Iran and the US including terrorism, Iran–Israel conflict and the human rights. While the West has accused Iran of state-sponsored terrorism, that country has also been victim of terrorism and served as a key partner to the US in combating terrorism in the Middle East, especially following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Based on analysis, I prescribe a way forward for the two states in combating their common enemies.

Iran's hostile stance toward Israel does not limit to Rafsanjani period. Iran's hostile stance toward Israel became a major factor in Iran–US relations. The chapter discusses the views of Tehran and explains the root causes of Iran's hostility toward Israel. Finally, the chapter discusses the dispute over human rights, details the views of the two states in this respect and offers solution to this complex dimension of the conflict.

Chapter 8 is a road map to peace. The current precarious state of affairs cannot be sustained. If no common ground is created between Iran and the US, one of two scenarios, both with similar outcomes, is likely to occur. As pressures build over time, patience for long diplomatic processes will diminish and, most likely, military confrontation will take the place of diplomacy. Or, as the US tightens sanctions and, ultimately, the *nezam's* survival is threatened, once they feel that they have nothing more to lose, Iran's retaliatory actions such as destabilizing American allies in the Persian Gulf, destabilizing US interests

in the region, and disrupting the passage of oil through the Strait of Hormuz may lead to an inadvertent or deliberate war.

The rewards for normalization of relations would be substantial for both countries. In cooperation, the two sides could address the concerns of the United States' Arab allies, stabilize Iraq, Syria, and even Afghanistan, secure a sustainable and stable flow of oil, create more security for Israel, fight Salafi-Al-Qaeda terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and put an end to Iran's economic difficulties.

Although there are more issues involved than nuclear development, a peaceful resolution to that *one* issue should be considered as a key starting point for peace between the two states. However, "[p]eace on the nuclear issue alone while other cases of conflict remain unresolved would be unstable."²²

As a proponent of the "maximum engagement" school of thought between Iran and the West/US, based on 35 years of experiences in diplomacy, in order to address mistrust and promote better and enduring friendly relations between Iran and the West/US, my aim is to formulate a workable, realistic, win-win road map to resolve the protracted standoff in Iran-US relations. I wish to substitute friendship and peace for hatred and hostilities between the two great countries of Iran and America. This aim is pursued in *Iran and The United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*.

Chapter 1

IRAN-US RELATIONS: FROM FRIENDS TO FOES

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, relations between Iran and United States have been typified by heightened animosity and mistrust, at times teetering on the brink of confrontation. However, this has not always been the case. Prior to this period, from the origins of formal Iran-US relations dating back to the mid-1800s, two other vastly different periods define the interaction between the two nations.

During the first period (1856–1953), Iran viewed the United States as a benevolent international power whose intent was to support the independence and sovereignty of a weaker nation threatened by imperial powers. However, following the Second World War and the ensuing rise of the United States as a superpower—as well as its increasing tensions with the Soviet Union—its interest in preserving the independence of Iran quickly dissipated. The newfound international position of the US shifted its foreign policy objectives, particularly in the resource-rich region of the Middle East, focusing more on energy security and encumbering the spread of Soviet influence.

The 1953 coup that toppled Iran's first democratically elected government marked the beginning of the second period of relations (1953–79). The US supported the ousting of Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. Ironically, it was US assistance in building institutions to strengthen reform and representative rule in Iran that had planted the seed of democracy. By installing Mohammad Reza Shah in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, Iran-US relations entered a new chapter characterized by a patron-client relationship and intrusive involvement by the US in Iran's domestic affairs.

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran entered the third period, which will be comprehensively discussed in this book.

Cordial Relations: 1856–1953

The beginnings of Iran–US relations dates back to 1856, when the two nations signed a Treaty of Commerce and Friendship based on mutual understanding and friendship.¹ At the time, Americans were viewed favorably by Iranians, who had come to praise the United States for the growing charitable work of American missionaries in the country.² Initial American involvement was well received in Iran because it was in the midst of staving off British and Russian pressure on its territorial integrity. Iran sought to establish relations with Washington to offset their influence.³ The United States was widely regarded as a charitable international power whose foreign policy doctrine was based on protecting the weak from imperialist powers.⁴ What began as an economic treaty between the two nations in 1856 led to formal diplomatic relations, with the opening of the US diplomatic mission in Tehran in 1883 and the first Iranian representative arriving in Washington in 1888.⁵

Relations between the two countries remained cordial; there was no interference by the United States in the internal affairs of Iran, giving them no reason for distrust. The US retained its spectator role and refrained from intervening during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11. The uprising took place in response to the failure of the Qajar⁶ monarchy to improve the socio-economic and political condition of the people. This popular movement brought together all parts of Iranian society—the clerics, merchants, intellectuals, nationalists, and socialists—in an effort to curb the powers of the monarch. The national effort culminated in the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Iran.⁷

American heroes of Iran

While the US government avoided a public stance on the matter and refused to get involved in the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, nonetheless, from the ashes of the struggle to achieve independence, an American hero emerged for the Iranians: Howard Baskerville. In the early 1900s, Howard Baskerville emigrated to Iran as a Presbyterian missionary, teaching at the American Memorial School in Tabriz at the time second largest city of Iran, and, during the Constitutional Revolution, actively supporting the constitutionalists who were fighting against the royalists. He gave his life in the ensuing battle.

Baskerville's ultimate sacrifice for Iranian independence and the democratic movement in Iran not only made him a hero, but also

bolstered Iran's conviction that the United States supported the rights of the people and their thirst for freedom. Baskerville's example also gave rise to the idea that Americans viewed the "other" on an equal footing. His statement that "[t]he only difference between me and these people is my place of birth, and this is not a big difference"⁸ was the manifestation of that egalitarian view.

In response to the revolution, the British and Russians put their differences aside to ensure that their mutual interests in Iran were not jeopardized. Their efforts resulted in the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907, in which northern Iran would come under Russian influence while the south would be controlled by Britain.⁹ This foreign imposition made the reform and strengthening of institutions a critical necessity for the new government.

To spearhead the reform initiative, the Constitutionalists looked for a foreign partner that would actively and willingly assist in building an independent nation without ulterior motive. The natural choice was the United States, as it was the only major power that could be entrusted with such a task, particularly since the memory of Baskerville was fresh in the minds of the Constitutionalists and the US had established that its intentions in Iran were not to encroach on Iran's sovereignty.

This belief on the part of the Constitutionalists led to the Iranians requesting Washington to recommend a financial advisor who would assist Iran's restructuring of its financial sector. Such an advisor would be given the authority and scope necessary to perform the task. Washington accepted the request and by their recommendation, the Iranians recruited a lawyer with experience in financial matters, William Morgan Shuster. Shuster was not an employee of the American government but came as a private citizen, further deepening the perception that the United States had no wish or policy intention to meddle in Iran's domestic affairs, yet would extend its help to the country.¹⁰

Shuster arrived with a small team of financial advisors in 1911 and was shortly thereafter elected by the Iranian parliament as the Treasurer General of Persia. Shuster's devotion, dedication, and honesty in assisting Iran to the best of his ability engendered great respect from the Iranians, and contributed to the growing admiration for the ethical manner in which the United States operated. However, the Russians and British grew impatient with his outspoken opposition to their intrusion in Iran's domestic affairs. In Shuster's invaluable book, *The Strangling of Persia*, which detailed the events that led to the collapse of the Constitutional Revolution and described the encroachment of

British and Russian in Iran, he stated, "It was obvious that the people of Persia deserve much better than what they are getting, that they wanted us to succeed, but it was the British and the Russians who were determined not to let us succeed."¹¹

The independent stance Shuster adopted toward the imperial powers resulted in a Russian ultimatum to Iran to oust Shuster or face the consequences. The Iranians resisted the ultimatum. The Russians retaliated by invading northern Iran and marching onward toward the capital, Tehran. Only then was the decision reluctantly made to expel Shuster. The parliament was consequently suspended.

While Iran paid a high price, Shuster's stance and commitment to improving the Iranian economy and standing up for values such as equality, dignity, and freedom reinforced the positive perception the Iranian people had of the United States. Shuster later wrote, "The Persian people, fighting for a chance to live and govern themselves instead of remaining the serfs of wholly heartless and corrupt rulers, deserved better of fate than to be forced, as now, either to sink back into an even worse serfdom or to be hunted down and murdered as 'revolutionary dregs.' British and Russian statesmen may be proud of their work in Persia; it is doubtful whether anyone else is."¹²

There were other Americans who contributed immensely to the development of Iran. In the education sector, Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan was seen as the pioneer who laid the foundation for the modern education establishment in Iran. Jordan devoted his life to improving the educational system in Iran by serving as the principal of the American High School in Tehran from 1898 to 1941. In the medical field, Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran was the founder of Iran's first modern College of Medicine in 1879.

These examples and various others cemented the notion that the United States was interested in fostering better relations, advancing the Iranians' cause of independence, protecting the weak, and promoting democratic ideals. Yet it must be noted that US foreign policy toward Iran was also driven by a reluctance to challenge the vital interests of Britain and Russia, as evidenced in the dismissal of Shuster.

Saving Iran from British rule

At the onset of the First World War in 1914, Iran declared its neutrality and made numerous efforts to avoid the war. However, Iran's declared neutrality failed to protect it from the invasion of its territory by the belligerent powers of Russia and Britain. Owing to its strategic location,

Russia and Britain (Allied Powers) used Iranian territory to counter Ottoman (Central Power) forces as well as to guarantee that supplies from India would reach the British forces. Iran was destitute as its sovereignty was trampled on and its territory became a fighting ground between the opposing forces, leaving thousands of Iranians killed and its economy in tatters.

At this time, Iran once again reached out, asking for US assistance to safeguard its independence and to help maintain its neutrality. The United States responded with assurances to Iran that it would "lend its good offices to assist in doing whatever it may properly do to alleviate the conditions resulting from the situation existing in Europe."¹³ This was in line with President Wilson's proclamation that the United States would confirm that the weaker nations would be protected from the Allied powers' imperialist tendencies in the aftermath of the war.¹⁴ With this response, there was an air of optimism in Iran that the US would deliver on the promise.

This hope sustained Iran's positive image of the US. On the humanitarian front, the tensions on the western borders of the country required urgent relief; however, Iran had no capacity to respond. US groups created the Persian Relief Committee in 1916, which led the drive in soliciting relief aid for Iranians, with resounding success. This act of kindness was greatly appreciated by Iranians and was seen as another indicator of US generosity toward Iran. The creation of the American Persian Relief Commission in New York in 1918 continued relief efforts until the crisis was over.

The most significant test of the US commitment to weaker nations and evidence of its promise to protect Iran's independence came in the aftermath of the war.

The British were eager to solidify their hegemonic aspirations in Iran. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 had resulted in a weaker Russian influence in the region; the British moved to take advantage. To achieve their goal, the British had negotiated a secret treaty with the Iranian Prime Minister Vosuq od-Dowleh that, if ratified by the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*), would in essence have made Iran a protectorate of Great Britain.¹⁵ At this time, Iran's independence undoubtedly was on the line, and it was then that the United States took a firm stance against British imperialist policy in Iran.

Two statements were sent from US Secretary of State Robert Lansing to the US ambassador in Tehran. The first outlined the American government's opposition to such a deal between Iran and Britain while the second reassured the Iranians of US support for Iran's independence

by stating that “the United States has constantly and consistently showed its interest in the welfare of Persia.”¹⁶ These statements provided the backing the Iranians needed to take a bold position. The *Majlis* rejected the treaty.

This event brought about great changes in Iran–US relations: Iran perceived the US as a counterbalance to the influence of Britain, and now was determined to court the Americans by economic and political enticement to ensure America’s continued support for the independence of the country.

America helps to build modern Iran

In the aftermath of the First World War, Iran’s economy was in ruins and the government of the constitutional monarchy was eager to solidify its authority in the country. The Iranian government sought to attract foreign investment in the country. The commodity that could provide the greatest incentive was oil; however, the British, through earlier agreements, had secured oil concessions that were entirely one-sided in favor of the themselves. The case in point was a 1901 agreement that gave oil concessions to the southern Iranian fields to a British company, which was bought out and taken over by the British government in 1914 and renamed Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The terms of the agreement gave Iran a meager share of the net revenues, just 16 percent, while the Iranian government was not afforded access to the financial records of the company.¹⁷ These arbitrary and demeaning terms fueled anti-British sentiments in Iran. The Iranian government would seek to procure more favorable conditions in future oil concessions.

A military coup d’état, led by British- and Russian-supported Colonel Reza Khan,¹⁸ succeeded in 1921. By 1925, Reza Khan had consolidated both the political and military power that ended the Qajar dynasty. He subsequently proclaimed himself as king, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and piloted a new era of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran.

As the Iranian financial sector was in disarray once again, Tehran requested Washington to assist in recommending individuals to serve as the country’s financial advisors. Following the success the Shuster mission had previously accomplished, the US was a natural choice. The US responded to Iran’s request by proposing a team of American financial advisors led by Arthur C. Millspaugh, a former official with the US State Department’s Office of the Foreign Trade.¹⁹

In the next several years, Millspaugh worked with prodigious dedication to restructure the Iranian economy. He is credited with

overhauling the taxation system, increasing government revenues, cutting the deficit, and putting the finances of Iran on a sound basis. Secure finances led to the implementation of the Trans-Iranian railway project among other infrastructure developments and reforms.²⁰ Millspaugh's term ended after five years in 1927 due to his disagreement with Reza Shah, who wanted him to increase military expenditure. Relations between the United States and Iran remained cordial from the mid-1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The US unfailingly maintained its position of non-interference in the domestic affairs of Iran.²¹ Meanwhile, Reza Shah had consolidated his power, and spearheaded the strengthening of central government and the military capability of the country. He had become attracted to the rapid industrialization of Germany and began to improve relations with Berlin, particularly because the Germans grew increasingly hostile toward the British and Russians.²²

At the onset of the Second World War, Iran once again announced its neutrality and aimed to protect its sovereignty and independence. However, as was the case in the First World War, the Allied forces of Britain and Russia invaded Iran in 1941, on the pretext of curbing German influence in the country. The actual intention behind the invasion was to assure that their supply routes and oil fields were secured.²³ At the same time, Moscow and London made a decision to remove Reza Shah because of his support for and collaboration with the Germans. Reza Shah was expelled from Iran and was replaced by his son, 22-year-old Mohammad Reza.²⁴

Iranians still considered the United States to be a nation of idealistic values, which included protecting the weak and maintaining the independence of sovereign nations. Therefore, Tehran continued to pursue its policy of courting the United States in order to maintain the balance of power and mitigate the influence of Russia and Britain in Iranian affairs. Iran deduced that there was an urgent need for a strong advocate to ensure the Allied forces adhered to the treaty that they signed with Tehran in 1942, known as the Tripartite Agreement.²⁵ This treaty stipulated that Allied forces would remove their troops in the aftermath of the war and provide adequate reparations in exchange for using Iran's territory and resources for their war operations.

Iran-US relations further developed as the government of Iran solicited the services of American advisors, leading to the return of Millspaugh and other advisors, not only to assist with the financial sector but to oversee the military, police, transportation, and food security.²⁶ However, owing to internal divisions, instability, and the growing

disagreements between Mohammad Reza Shah and Millspaugh, the advisory missions failed and became a source of friction between Washington and Tehran, resulting in the termination of these missions in 1945.²⁷

In a 1943 military operation, the first US troops landed on Iranian soil to assist in securing supply routes to the Soviet Union. This event marked an end to the hands-off policy of the US toward Iran.²⁸ However, Iranians continued to believe that in any eventuality, the United States would support their right to self-determination. Two events in the period 1945–6 further supported this view. The first was the Tehran Conference of 1943, where Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, the leaders of Russia, United States, and Britain reaffirmed their commitment to Iran's sovereignty and acknowledged its invaluable contribution to the Allied war effort.²⁹ The second event occurred following the war, in 1946, when the British forces fulfilled their commitment and withdrew from Iranian soil under the Tripartite Agreement, although the Soviets refused to comply.

The six-month period of grace duly passed and there was no sign of the Russian troops leaving. President Truman issued a warning to the Russians that if they did not remove their troops, the US would send its forces to Iran. The Soviets, pressured by the US, eventually removed their troops in May 1946.³⁰ Truman's action served to reaffirm Iran's trust in the United States.

Twenty-Five Years of US Domination: 1953–79

In the years following the war, the United States adopted a cautious, yet emboldened approach to Iran. Originally the US was hesitant to engage fully with their Iranian counterparts, partly due to the complications of balancing the growing tension with the Soviets in the Cold War, the extensive reconstruction effort underway in Europe to counter communist influence, and the avoidance of blatantly encroaching on the British sphere of influence in Iran.

Nevertheless, the developing importance of oil, the strategic location of Iran, the history of cordial relations, and proclamation of the Truman Doctrine, which provided economic support to nations to offset communist and separatist movements, spurred the US to be more intimately involved with Iran. The Truman Doctrine materialized for the Iranians through an initial military aid package on June 20, 1947 of \$25 million to train the Iranian army and provide weapons. This

event formed the basis of the growing military and economic relations between the two countries, encouraging the US to vigorously pursue strategic relations with Iran.

The tipping point

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Iran was confronted with chronic economic problems that had led to depleted government resources and an inept government with weak institutions headed by an inexperienced young king, Mohammad Reza Shah. Previous promises of reparations for Iran's wartime assistance never materialized. The situation was further exacerbated by the unfavorable oil arrangement between Iran and Great Britain that gave rise to the British Petroleum Company (BP), which later became a source of humiliation and resentment for the Iranians.³¹ These one-sided conditions set in motion the aspiration for Iran to have more control over its natural resources and main source of revenue, namely oil.

In this pursuit for control of its own oil resources, the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*) in 1949 began to contemplate new terms for the oil agreement with AIOC. The person who championed this cause was Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh,³² whose attempts at negotiations failed, mainly due to British reluctance to adjust the terms of the agreement.³³ During this time, Iran once again turned to the United States to play a mediating role and uphold their independence in the face of British aggression. Initially, the Truman administration sympathized with the Iranians and placed pressure on Britain to reform its agreement on oil concessions. However, the British refused to compromise, and there was no headway. In these circumstances, it was inevitable that Iran would nationalize its oil.³⁴

By 1951, the oil issue had engrossed the nation and a wave of popular nationalism swept the country, culminating in the *Majlis* announcing the nationalization of Iranian oil in March 1951. A month later, pressed by popular demand, the Shah appointed Mohammad Mossadegh as the new Iranian Prime Minister.

The Iranian decision to go ahead with the nationalization of its oil industry unleashed a British move to orchestrate sanctions in the form of an international boycott of Iranian oil, freezing Iranian assets, and taking steps to increase Iran's international isolation.³⁵ The British also undertook covert measures to oust Prime Minister Mossadegh, and turned to the United States to assist them with the plan. President Truman rejected the initial request by the British for US cooperation,

asserting, “We don’t overthrow governments; the United States has never done this before, and we’re not going to start now.”³⁶

Eventually, the British dragged the US into their deceptive gambit by using the anti-communist fervor of the Cold War and false propaganda to advance the unsubstantiated claim that Prime Minister Mossadegh was leaning toward the Soviet Union and was backed by the Iranian Communist Party (Tudeh Party).³⁷ This position gained traction with the election of President Eisenhower in November 1952, who came to power partly because of his passionate opposition to communist Soviet expansion.³⁸

Eisenhower’s administration, fearing that communism would gain a foothold in Iran and would contribute to the spread of nationalistic tendencies and communism in the region, decided to support the British plan to oust Prime Minister Mossadegh. The British MI6 and American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began to devise the plan, codenamed Operation AJAX, which included the use of negative propaganda against the Mossadegh government, rigging elections, bribing officials, and creating civil disturbance through hired gangs and the financing of a military coup led by former General Fazlollah Zahedi, with the blessing of the Shah.³⁹

The first attempt at the coup failed on August 15, 1953 and the Shah fled to Italy, while Colonel Fazlollah Zahedi, who was tasked with leading the coup, went into hiding, only to be encouraged by the CIA and MI6 to initiate another attempt on August 19. This second effort, supported by CIA and MI6 agents, succeeded in bringing to an end the budding democratic movement in Iran and ejecting Prime Minister Mossadegh.⁴⁰

The coup d’état was the single most pivotal event in shaping Iran–US relations for decades to come. Whether it was geostrategic imperatives and fears of a communist takeover, Soviet influence, or oil resources that motivated the US to intervene, the coup changed the psyche of Iranian society and destroyed Iranians’ positive image of the United States. The humiliation and frustration felt by Iranians laid the foundation of the anti-Americanism that ultimately produced the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The US: Senior partner

In the aftermath of the CIA and MI6 coup, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi returned from Italy and was reinstated as the Shah of Iran. The ousted Prime Minister Mossadegh was sentenced to a three-year jail sentence.

Mossadegh would spend the rest of his life under house arrest. The Shah took immediate measures to gain full authority in the country by placing the nation under a military curfew. He subsequently attempted to purge all dissent. He launched a wave of arrests, imprisonments, torture, and death sentences that affected nearly all of Mossadegh's supporters, sympathizers, and opposition figures.⁴¹ Furthermore, all opposition parties were outlawed and political organizations and gatherings banned. The *Majlis* was not spared. The limited authority and powers it had were stripped away and the Shah crafted a puppet "two-party" system that saw both political parties aligned with him and under his full control, rendering the parliament impotent and ineffective.

Concessions were made to the Americans for their role in reinstating the Shah, primarily securing their energy interests in Iran in the form of oil concessions. This was reflected in the United States taking a 40 percent share in the oil consortium.⁴² These concessions would usher in greater US involvement in the domestic affairs of Iran, increased US reliance on Iranian oil, and an American desire to strengthen the Shah's domineering rule over the country.⁴³ The Eisenhower administration also intended to curb communist encroachment in the Middle East by bolstering the Shah. Despite the threat that communism posed, the US made a strategic mistake by investing in a harsh dictator as a counterbalance.

The US and the British had control over a pro-Western Shah with staunch anti-communist tendencies. To ensure the West would maintain their hold on Iran in the face of the Soviet threat, immediately following the coup, the CIA helped create a new Iranian intelligence agency and trained virtually all of the first generation of its personnel.⁴⁴

Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, "SAVAK," was established in 1956 and became the most feared component of the Shah's power structure. Right or wrong, Iranians associated SAVAK with the backing of the United States. The level of terror unleashed by SAVAK and the impunity with which they operated in the country, made the organization one of the most brutal foundations of the Shah's power. In the perspective of the Iranian public, SAVAK was regarded as inseparable from American interference in Iran's affairs and the Tehran government's repressive control. A portion of those arrested and tortured included members of the religious establishment, both clerics and non-clerics. Many of these individuals later directed the opposition movement in the late 1970s, and subsequently, in the aftermath of

the 1979 Revolution, took the most prominent positions in the new establishment. These included Grand Ayatollahs such as Ayatollah Montazeri (one of the main constitutional architects of the Islamic Republic) and political religious leaders such as Ayatollah Khamenei (Iran's second Supreme Leader), Ayatollah Rafsanjani (current head of the Expediency Council and former president), Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani (current head of the Assembly of Experts), Ayatollah Beheshti (first head of the judiciary), and Mr. Karroubi (former speaker of the parliament). These men held a deep sense of animosity toward the US for its support of the Shah.

The Shah was perceived favorably by Washington and seen as a loyal supporter of US interest in the region. In return, the Americans embarked on an extensive program to bolster the Shah's power and rule, providing vast military aid, with scores of advisors and trainers sent to Iran between 1952 and 1961, helping to build a formidable military force for the Shah.

By the early 1960s, the Shah had consolidated his power and was expanding the reach of SAVAK to guarantee that any dissent would be crushed. However, there was growing unease in the US regarding the stability of the Shah's rule, as Iran began to experience rampant inflation and high food prices. While the economy had grown considerably, wealth was concentrated in the hands of Shah royalists, foreign businesses, select sectors, and urban centers of the country, thus increasing the disparity with the rest of the country and its people. Furthermore, stifled political freedom and brutal suppression of any form of dissent resulted in growing restlessness among Islamists and among the politically conscious educated population.

The Shah's first and foremost goal was to Westernize the country. However, the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s, fearing widespread revolution in Iran, urged the Shah to implement socio-economic reforms. The outcome was a far-reaching program of political, social, and economic reform—the Shah's so-called White Revolution.

The White Revolution aimed to transform the Iranian economy from an agrarian to an industrial one through land reform to end feudalism, privatization of government-owned enterprises, extension of voting rights to women, and curbing the influence of the religious establishment in the education sector by initiating a literacy drive and an overhaul of the education system. The heavy dependence of the Shah on US economic advisors had characterized the reforms of the White Revolution as distinctly Western, with insufficient attention given to the social and religious fabric of Iranian society and its traditional

resistance to Western dominance. This had roots in Reza Shah's decision to prohibit the usage of hijab by women as well as reform of the judiciary and the education system based on Westernized models and standards of the late 1920s and 1930s, a system which was predominantly under the control of the clergy.⁴⁵

A segment of the clergy headed by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began to voice their disagreement with the White Revolution based on religious grounds, arguing that the reforms had stripped the country of its religious and cultural identity. Granting suffrage to women was viewed by this segment of the clergy as fake, deceptive and aimed at Westernization of the country. There was also mounting opposition within the urban working class and intelligentsia. They were critical of reforms that had not translated into meaningful political rights and participation in the country's governance.

The growing disagreement and opposition to the Shah's policies boiled over in June 1963. In a sermon, the prominent senior cleric Ayatollah Khomeini openly criticized the Shah and his White Revolution as un-Islamic, in violation of the constitution, spreading moral corruption in the country, and submissive to America and Israel. In particular, Ayatollah Khomeini addressed two issues: women's behavior was a matter for Islamic guidance, and foreign concessions and capitulations—namely granting special status to the foreign military forces—bypassed Iranian jurisdiction.

This infuriated the Shah, who consequently ordered the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini. In response, protests broke out in major cities throughout the country, where people began chanting anti-Shah slogans in support of the imprisonment of their (*Source of Emulation*) Marja-e Taqlid. What transpired was to mark the beginning of the end of the Shah, when armed forces opened fire on and killed a number of protestors, and subsequent arrests and executions were carried out by SAVAK. Former US diplomat William Miller told me that “in Qom, the Shah sent paratroopers who killed Mullahs. These deaths prompted the march of many dressed in shrouds from Qom to Tehran. I saw this march and the riots in Tehran.”

Under pressure, the Shah decided to release Ayatollah Khomeini after two months' imprisonment, yet he continued to be an outspoken critic of the Shah and his repressive regime. Ayatollah Khomeini had ascended from this protest in Qom to be one of the key voices of opposition to the regime. He would come to be an essential factor in the demise of the Shah's rule 15 years later.

The Shah: America's pillar in the Middle East

The Shah pressed the United States to assist his build-up of the military. To further strengthen his case, he relied on the Cold War mentality sweeping the United States, and voiced concerns that he could come under threat from the Soviet Union and Arab countries. By this time, Iran had become an important strategic ally of the United States. Growing economic, social, political, and military ties were intended to be a buffer against the spread of communism to neighboring Arab countries. In order to secure the military aid the Shah sought from the US, he first fast-tracked a Status of Forces bill through the *Majlis*, infamously known as the "capitulation law," effectively granting US military personnel stationed in Iran and their dependents full diplomatic immunity in October 1964. The passing of the Status of Forces bill was instrumental in heightening anti-American sentiments in Iran, as the bill clearly infringed Iran's sovereignty and conjured up memories of nineteenth-century capitulation laws which exempted Europeans from domestic Iranian laws. Subsequently, President Johnson's administration removed barriers to providing sophisticated armaments to Iran.

The US military and regional alliance with Iran developed even further during President Richard Nixon's tenure of office from 1969 to 1974. To ensure that Iran would be up to the task of acting as a buffer against the USSR expansionism in the region, President Nixon traveled to Tehran in 1972 to negotiate arms agreements including the sale of high performance jet fighters, the most sophisticated conventional weapons, with an extensive team of military advisors and technicians.

The Shah, eager for Iran to become a regional powerhouse, was alacritous to accept the high-tech military aid and began an ambitious drive for expansion of the Iranian military capability, which saw military bases popping up on the northern borders to monitor Soviet ICBM missile test activities in addition to bases in the south to secure the Persian Gulf, ensuring secure transit of oil from the region. Armed with the revenues from rising oil prices of the 1970s, Iran was in a position to spend lavishly on its military expansion; and the US was enthusiastic about providing the hardware and expertise. Within a few years, tens of thousands of American military advisors and technicians were stationed in Iran and a large amount of oil revenue was committed to military expenditure, mostly directed to the United States.

The end of the Pahlavi dynasty

The solid support and backing of the West, particularly the United States, the abundance of petrodollars, Westernization, a ruthless secret service, and a formidable military establishment made the Shah confident at the turn of the 1970s. Yet there were ample indications of widespread dissent brewing throughout the country, and plentiful evidence of the failure of his regime's economic, social, and political reforms. The White Revolution had failed, and the gulf between the rich and the poor had widened due to extensive corruption, nepotism, and economic mismanagement of oil revenues.

The Pahlavi dynasty's unyielding attempt to secularize and liberalize Iranian society, and its going to war with Islamic values—to the extent of replacing the Islamic calendar with an imperial calendar—stirred up fury among the clergy. The clergy's opposition to the Shah's regime was initially more social than political. Until the mid-1970s, the vast majority of the clergy were apolitical, neither opposing nor supporting the Shah openly. However, ultimately they joined the revolutionary movement, led by Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, mainly because the regime had failed to attack moral decadence.

Naturally, the grassroots of society, who backed the clergy and passionately believed in Islamic traditions, also opposed the Shah's Westernization programs, which contrasted sharply with Islamic values. Religious conservatives overwhelmingly came from the poor and those on low incomes. The Shah's system collided with this segment of society because it was indifferent to social justice and would undermine their identity. Ayatollah Khomeini highlighted the cultural decadence and spectacularly mobilized the masses by a reinterpretation of Shi'a theology fused with anti-Americanism.

Furthermore, the repression of political freedom and the increasingly brutal actions of the SAVAK, coupled with the Shah's lavish expenditure on luxuries while inequality was growing in the country, provoked discontent and resentment among the intelligentsia. The Shah's staunch pro-Western policy, manifested in a more pervasive American involvement in the domestic affairs of Iran, also collided with the nationalist sentiments of the Iranian people. In the eyes of many Iranians, the 1953 coup transformed Iran from an independent democracy into a puppet dictatorship.

These factors contributed to a deep abhorrence of the Shah and his abject subjugation to the West, in particular the United States. The Shah's decision to grant immunity to US military personnel seemed to

mark a final blow to the long history of Iran's struggle for self-determination and independence. Finally, the establishment of a single party system in 1975 left the Iranian population without any hope of political reform.

It was in this environment that the Iranians rose in revolution to force a structural change that would bring about an era of self-determination and independence from foreign powers while building a more egalitarian society. However, signs of discord did not ring alarm bells in Washington until it was too late.

Economic and military ties between the US and Iran were steadily increasing even when, beneath the surface, Iran was smoldering. The belief in the Shah's ability to withstand domestic dissent was evident when, in December 1977, while hosting the Shah in Washington, President Jimmy Carter raised a toast and stated, "Under the Shah's brilliant leadership, Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troublesome regions of the world. There is no other state figure whom I could appreciate and like more."⁴⁶

Within a few weeks of Carter's public endorsement, a small anti-Shah demonstration took place in the holy city of Qom, in protest against an article that had smeared Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴⁷ The protestors were violently suppressed, leading to a nationwide outbreak of protests. Even then, there was confidence in some quarters in Washington that the Shah was in a strong enough position to withstand domestic dissent.⁴⁸

With every violent repression of the protests, further dissent was fueled, culminating on September 8, 1978 in what became known as Black Friday, when the Shah's troops fired on demonstrators. There is no reliable report about the number of dead and injured, but the effect of Black Friday in terms of intensifying the demonstrations followed by a widening crackdown by the state is undeniable. The wave of protests could no longer be controlled, and spread all over the country. The economy came to a standstill. The Shah's last-ditch attempts to deal with past grievances and reconcile the protestors by appointing a new prime minister and promising elections made no impression on the protestors.

In the midst of the chaos engulfing Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, still exiled in Iraq, issued fervent messages of opposition against the dictatorial and Western-dominated rule of the Shah. His charisma, religious piety, indefatigable stance against the Shah, and history of resistance, propelled him to become the undisputed leader of the protest movement in the country. His increasing popularity and drive to bring about the demise of Shah's regime made Saddam Hussein

wary of having Ayatollah Khomeini remain in Iraq. Saddam eventually forced his departure on October 3, 1978. After a failed attempt to reside in Kuwait, Ayatollah Khomeini arrived in France, where he would continue to orchestrate the revolution in Iran.

Meanwhile, Washington was caught off-guard with the fast-paced changes occurring in Iran. They had the impression that the Shah would be able to quell any dissent, particularly since, thanks to the Americans, he had built up a formidable military capability and intelligence apparatus. This led to widespread confusion in Washington on the course of action to take. Some US officials advocated a last-minute military coup to salvage their interest and restabilize the country, whereas others feared that any US action would only deepen the already zealous anti-Americanism felt within the Iranian society.⁴⁹

In any event, throughout the events that unfolded, the United States reassured the Shah that they would back him until the end. Even after the massacre of Jaleh Square on Friday, September 8, 1978, President Carter called the Shah to assure him of his support. The White House reaffirmed the special tie between the US and Iran but regretted the loss of lives in Jaleh Square.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the Carter administration came to the conclusion that the Shah had no chance of surviving the upheaval. This led the American government to adopt a cautious position in order to deal with the new administration that would take control.

In January 1979, Iran was seized by a revolutionary spirit. Millions poured onto the streets, workers went on strike, and symbols of the Shah were vandalized and burnt. There was no longer any place for the Shah, leading him to finally take the decision to leave the country on January 16, and to hand over the government to Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar. Less than two weeks later, on February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini, after 14 years in exile, returned to Iran from France, with millions of citizens thronging the streets of Tehran to welcome him back. His return galvanized the revolution.

Addressing hundreds of thousands, he voiced his staunch opposition to the newly appointed Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar: "These people are trying to bring back the regime of the Shah or another regime. I will strike [with my fists] at the mouths of this government." This speech paved the way for the rapid disintegration of the government system. Subsequent to the victory of the revolution and a national referendum, the Islamic Republic of Iran was born on April 1, 1979. The Shah's rule, and with it the ancient institution of monarchy, came to an end, together with the US domination of Iran. The emergence of the Islamic

Republic in Iran and US reactions to this unparalleled, obscure reality marked the beginning of an era of hostility between these two states.

Era of Animosity: 1979 to Today

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was a popular movement that encompassed a wide spectrum of political, social, and economic groups that shared a common agenda to secure freedom from the suppressive regime of the Shah, elimination of foreign powers' domination of Iran, and social justice. However, as the revolution evolved, its ideological characteristics became defined more clearly as anti-imperialist, nationalist, anti-dictatorship, and Islamic revivalist. These were crystallized in the revolution's dominant slogan of "Esteghlal, azadi, jomhuri-e-Eslami," meaning independence, freedom, and Islamic republic. The revolutionary masses viewed the demands for a reduction of the gulf between the rich and poor, and respect, protection, and enhancement of Iranian culture to be encompassed in the notion of an Islamic republic.

In merits notice that in the aftermath of the revolution, Iran did not sever its ties with the United States, while the US also recognized the new revolutionary government. This was a clear indication that the two states intended to open a new chapter in Iran-US relations. However, this phase was short lived. A few months after the victory of the revolution, radical Muslim students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage. Few could have imagined that the effect of the hostage crisis would be so long lasting. That was the beginning of a new era in the relationship between Iran and the United States, characterized by intense hostility and mistrust. These mutual sentiments of hatred and mistrust resulted in both governments trying to justify destructive policies carried out in an effort to cripple the capabilities of the other to do harm.

While this book seeks to answer the essential question of why, despite numerous rapprochements by the two states, they are locked in such a relationship, this section considers their respective grievances, as they see them. Although the American side of the story will also be covered, as is the objective of this book, the focus will be on the Iranian side. It is worth noting that this discussion does not aim to justify or refute any aspects of the two perspectives.

The American perspective

Neither Iran nor the US dispute the nature of the relations during first period. With regard to the second period, the US has officially admitted that its involvement in the 1953 coup and support of the Shah was a mistake.⁵¹ Therefore, there is no longer any major argument or disagreement over the second period, either. What remains in dispute are the activities of each party during the third period and their share in the formation of the conflict-ridden relationship between the two states since the 1979 Revolution. This is our focus in the following pages.

According to the United States, tensions with Iran are an outcome of its conduct regardless of the origins of the conflict between the two governments. Americans, unlike Iranians, do not focus on the history of hostilities, although they might have registered them somewhere in their minds. As the US State Department has commented, “The United States has long-standing concerns over Iran’s nuclear program, sponsorship of terrorism, and human rights record ... Iran still has not recognized Israel’s right to exist and has hindered the Middle East peace process by arming militants, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”⁵²

With regard to terrorism, the US accuses Iran of the following terrorist acts: the Beirut military barracks bombing on October 23, 1983 that targeted US and French military personnel, with a total of 299 killed, among them 241 US military personnel; the Khobar Tower bombing on June 25, 1996 in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US Air Force personnel and injured 372 others; a slew of assassinations throughout Europe of Iranian dissident figures in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including the assassination of Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders at a Greek restaurant in Germany on September 17, 1992; support for organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad,⁵³ all three groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) by the US State Department and as such constituting part of the “war on terror”;⁵⁴ support for extremist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq;⁵⁵ an assassination attempt on the Saudi Arabian ambassador on US soil;⁵⁶ and multiple assassination attempts and bombings targeting Israelis in countries such as Bulgaria, India, Thailand, and Georgia in 2012. Tehran has denied all these accusations. In the following chapters, some of the most critical terror cases will be analyzed and their complexities revealed.

One of the main US issues has been Tehran’s opposition to the Middle East peace process. According to the US State Department,

arming and supporting militant groups who are opposed to peace between Israel and Palestine is an indication of deliberate attempts to prevent peace from becoming a reality. Moreover, the emergence of the mantra of the “export of the revolution,” shortly after the Islamic Revolution’s victory, became a major cause of tension between Iran and the presently-known Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iran and the United States. Although Iran emphasized that the export of the revolution would be by word and not by sword,⁵⁷ the US and its regional allies viewed the revolutionary and Islamic nature of the Iranian system as a threat to the stability of Arab Muslim regimes of oil-rich countries that maintained close ties with the United States.

The human rights situation in Iran has been a constant point of contention between Iran and the US. American allegations of human rights violations in Iran began in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and have grown steadily since the Iranian elections of 2009. The June 2012 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* by the US Department of State explicitly points to Iran as a perpetrator of state-sanctioned torture.⁵⁸ According to the report, in the aftermath of the 2009 disputed presidential elections, the Iranian government utilized “beatings, stress positions, denial of medical attention, and prolonged solitary confinement” against human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and others related to social movements. The allegations of torture were also expounded by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the state of human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed.⁵⁹ Other human rights issues, such as discrimination against women, lack of freedom of expression, and a significant increase in known executions in Iran, are also raised by the US and the UN.⁶⁰

Finally, the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has remained one of the major disputes between Iran and the US since 1979. Almost all US administrations have accused Iran of harboring WMD ambitions. At the heart of this dispute lies Iran’s nuclear program. Since the revelation of the program in 2003, the US official position has been that it is apprehensive about the real nature of the program. Due to the IAEA reports, the US maintains that Iran should halt its uranium enrichment activities until the concerns about its nuclear project are addressed.

The Iranian perspective

The Iranian *nezam* believes that, for its part, the US as the global superpower has applied almost all possible instruments at its command,

short of an outright military invasion, to attain the goal of bringing down the Islamic Republic. Since the 1979 Revolution, these instruments, the Iranian government believes, have included a combination of subversion policies, sanctions, covert operations, support of militant groups, military action, support for regional aggression against Iran, cyber war, accusing Iran of terrorism, human rights violations and seeking to acquire WMD, and last but not least, cultural aggression.

Subversion

The United States unleashed a propaganda war to incite internal opposition in Iran against the Islamic Republic, as well as galvanizing anti-Iranian sentiment in the US and the international community shortly after the revolution. To reach Iranians in Iran and strengthen anti-government elements within and outside, the US set up Farsi-language TV and radio stations. Meanwhile, with the goal of destabilizing the Iranian government, it officially allocated a budget under the Iran Freedom Support Act to back the Iranian opposition and exile television stations.⁶¹ Voice of America has dedicated a considerable amount of air time to the opposition figures who are openly and closely working with the West to spread rumors and misinformation while openly passing instructions to the Iranian people on how to create chaos within the country and organize protest.

Demonizing statements by US officials, from the president down, have resulted in the creation of a damning image of Iran internationally. One high-ranking Iranian official told me that “history paints a different picture of who were the exploiters, instigators of violence, and supporters of despotic regimes.” What exacerbated this view was that the US mainstream media increasingly attacked the Iranian government and portrayed them as irrational fundamentalists, whose goal is to harm Americans. It is worth noting that in the eyes of the Iranian leadership, there is no distinction between the American media, which is privately owned, and the government. For them, it is unfathomable that the media should write or say something that is not favored by their government.

Sanctions

Sanctions have obviously played a fundamental role in American coercive policy toward Iran. Iran views increasing pressure by the US to be in pursuit of two aims: first, immediately after the victory of the Islamic Republic, to uproot Islamic revivalism and prevent it from spreading to the region, and by the collapse of the Islamic Republic, make an example to others who might seek similar change; second, to

regain its foothold in the country and implant a pro-Western, client government.

Economic sanctions began to come into effect against Iran right after the hostage crisis following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. On November 14, 1979, President Carter, through executive order 12710, banned imports of Iranian oil, froze some \$12 billion in Iranian assets in the US, and later banned all US trade with and travel to Iran. The effects of US sanctions were felt immediately in Iran, particularly since the revolution had created havoc in government institutions and their ability to function. In this regard, President Carter's executive order had an adverse effect. It diminished the pro-West and moderate faction within the Iranian government, that is, the base that the US aimed to empower, and instead strengthened the growing anti-American sentiments and hardened the revolutionaries and helped them to reinforce their position in Iran's political structure.

The US uses allegations of support for terrorism, human rights violations, and nuclear ambitions to justify the implementation of sanctions against and coercive policies toward the Islamic Republic. Iran has been under the weight of US economic, scientific, military and political sanctions for three decades. There are examples of the application of the sanctions that have been negative for the US image, particularly the prohibition placed on Iran's aviation sector, resulting in Boeing's inability to sell aircraft, repair parts, and equipment in respect of Iran's ageing fleets of passenger planes, mostly purchased from the US during the Shah's rule. These sanctions have placed civilian lives in danger and have once again intensified animosity between the two countries.

Since the actions of the Carter administration, subsequent US governments have broadened the scope and depth of the sanctions placed on Iran. Iran was invaded and came under direct aggression from Saddam Hussein on September 22, 1980 and began an eight-year war; the US added further sanctions including arms sales and dual-use goods and technologies. During the war, while Iran was under immense pressure, under congressional pressure, President Reagan banned all US imports from Iran in 1987.

The sanctions continued unabated, and increased in the 1990s, with the Clinton administration expanding their range by banning all American investments in Iran, particularly in the petroleum industry. The sanctions were based on the charge that Iran was a "state sponsor of terrorism," and a suspicion that the country was seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction. To increase the potency and reach of the

sanctions, the Clinton administration began to expand US unilateral sanctions by placing pressure on Iran's trading partners to follow suit. This led to the passing of Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in 1996 to urge foreign companies not to invest in Iran's oil and gas industry, the main source of the government's income.

During his tenure, President George W. Bush introduced further wide-ranging sanctions on Iran. At this time, the Iranian nuclear program had become of international concern, and the failure of negotiations had led Washington to develop sanctions significantly, particularly with the passage of the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act in 2006.

US President Barack Obama, immediately after taking office signaled his willingness to enter into a dialogue with the Islamic Republic on a wide range of issues, aiming to remove 30 years of hostility, and create "a new beginning" between the two countries. The new beginning, as will be discussed in this book, was botched as a result of insulting presentation by President Obama, as perceived by the Iranian leadership, and under the pressure of the pro-Israel lobby and Congress, the engagement policy of Obama was practically abandoned, leading to the imposition of the most draconian sanctions on Iran during Obama's first term of office (2009–13).

In June 2010, President Obama signed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA). As a result, Iran could not purchase refined petroleum products, such as petrol, while major Western oil companies severed their ties with the Islamic Republic.

In November 2011, President Obama expanded the sanctions to target the Iranian Central Bank and curtail oil exports, citing Iran's lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and doubts regarding the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. President Obama further tightened the screws on Iran by signing an executive order in February 2012, which included provisions requiring US institutions to freeze Iranian assets and further isolate Iran's Central Bank.

The number and effect of the measures adopted during the Obama administration dwarfed the impact of sanctions applied over the previous three decades. Following the last round of US sanctions on Iran's Central Bank and oil industry, the European Union, the UK, and Canada followed suit.

In January 2012, the European Union, under pressure from the United States, placed sanctions on Iran's Central Bank and approved a

phased oil embargo that would go into effect in June 2012. The increase of sanctions on Iran was compounded by Washington's pressure on other nations for compliance or risk being barred from the US market for their dealings with Iran's Central Bank and oil sector. One of the harshest blows to the Iranian financial system came with the US Congress threatening to place sanctions on the Belgian-based Society for Worldwide International Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) unless they cut ties with all Iranian banks. The world's major banks use SWIFT to send secured messages crucial to making international transfer payments. Unsurprisingly, the EU yielded to US threats and consequently cut off the Iranian Central Bank from the international financial system.

The United States also spearheaded four rounds of United Nations Security Council sanctions on Iran from 2006 to 2010, once again justifying them on concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

However, the unilateral sanctions applied by the United States, its pressure on other nations to apply similar measures, and the spearheading of UNSC sanctions on Iran did not have any success in changing Iran's behavior. In fact, they resulted in a significant expansion and development of Iran's nuclear program. Addressing Iran's policy in a speech in New York in January 2012, Obama announced that he had rallied the world powers and built an "unprecedented" sanctions regime against Iran, claiming that US-led sanctions had reduced Iran's economy to a "shambles." Indeed, some experts maintain that under economic sanctions, Iran had suffered 30 percent inflation and 20 percent unemployment.⁶² Obviously, the poor and the middle class would pay a high price.

Covert operations and support of militant groups

Operation Ajax, the code name for the covert action to overthrow the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, was the first CIA operation against Iran. Covert operations against Iran have been expanded to include the utilization of stealth surveillance drones, purportedly penetrating 600 miles into Iranian territory. One super-advanced RQ 170 drone was downed in Iran in December 2011.

Covert activities are not only limited to surveillance operations. The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) has overwhelming evidence that confirms several reports in the Western media of the US allegedly supporting Baluchi group Jundolloh, one of the most brutal terrorist organizations, against Iran.^{63 64 65 66} There have

been multiple reports revealing that the US has been providing training and intelligence to the group to enable it to “stage attacks across the border into Iran on Iranian military officers, Iranian intelligence officers, kidnapping them, executing them on camera.”⁶⁷

One objective of the US covert operations, as mentioned in the media reports, is to destabilize the Iranian government. But when it comes to separatist groups, another goal is to jeopardize the territorial integrity of the country. These US policies created more distance between Tehran and Washington. It is the view of Tehran that provoking ethnic and religious disputes in Iran is a modern adoption of the old British doctrine of “divide and rule,” in practice, building up weak internal forces in a client-patron relationship to allow them to challenge the regime.

According to Iran’s MOIS, the United States intelligence agencies have been involved in providing training and material support for separatist groups in an effort to undermine the Islamic Republic. Some reports in the Western media support this accusation.⁶⁸ These groups are clandestinely supported to advance US interests within Iran, being used for intelligence gathering, covert operations, and sabotage.⁶⁹

In 2006, the PEJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), a terrorist, separatist militant group, conducted a deadly attack in which 24 Iranian security personnel were killed. The attack prompted former US Representative Dennis Kucinich to question the ability of the PEJAK to launch such an attack from Iraq without prior US knowledge.⁷⁰ According to another report, US intelligence sources have indicated US financial, material, and tactical support for the PEJAK to place internal pressure on the Iranian government, and that the group was provided with “a list of targets inside Iran of interest to the US.”⁷¹

The foremost terrorist group that has inflicted harm on the Iranian society is the *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MEK). The MEK earned a terrorist group designation on October 8, 1997 when the US State Department established the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list.⁷² It is important to note that the leader of the MEK, Massoud Rajavi, prior to the revolution in a meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, had requested permission and blessing from him to target Americans and the inner circle of the Shah’s regime for assassination. Ayatollah Khomeini, however, completely opposed such actions and considered it un-Islamic.⁷³

Following the 1979 Revolution, in a bid to take over the reins of power, the MEK turned their opposition toward the newly found Islamic Republic in a slew of terrorist acts that cost the lives of thousands of

Iranian civilians, military, and political figures. In addition to its lethal terrorist attacks within Iran, the MEK moved its headquarters to Iraq in 1986 and joined the war effort with Saddam Hussein against Iran. MEK was financially and militarily backed by the Iraqi dictator until his fall in 2003.⁷⁴ The group was used by Saddam to provide intelligence, fight Iranian soldiers, and assist in the bloody crackdown on Iraqi Shia and Kurdish populations.⁷⁵

Making matters worse was the move by the Obama administration on September 21, 2012 to remove the MEK from the US Foreign Terrorist Organization List. How this happened is an interesting story in itself.

A *Guardian* investigation, drawing partly on data researched by the Centre for Responsive Politics—a group tracking the impact of money in US politics—has identified a steady flow of funds from key Iranian American organizations and their leaders into the campaign to have the People’s Mujahidin Organization of Iran removed from the list of terrorist organizations. The campaign to bury the MEK’s bloody history of bombings and assassinations that killed American businessmen, Iranian politicians, and thousands of civilians, and to portray it as a loyal US ally against the Islamic government in Tehran, has seen large sums of money directed at three principal targets: members of Congress, Washington lobby groups, and influential former officials.⁷⁶

The conclusion drawn by Iran’s leadership is that frequent talk about human rights and terrorism is essentially nothing but a foreign policy tool that the US utilizes to bring down those governments that are not submitting to its hegemony and are seeking independence. According to some reports, the group has been provided with training and access to covert military operational knowledge inside the US, at Department of Energy sites in the state of Nevada.⁷⁷

These covert operations have been backed by substantial financial resources, including a purported \$400 million fund to destabilize Iran authorized by former US President George W. Bush, focused on a campaign of “propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation of Iran’s currency.”⁷⁸

Military actions

Direct military action against Iran has been a significant factor in maintaining and elevating mistrust and hostility between the two

nations. A significant direct military event was the downing of Iran Air passenger flight 655 by the USS *Vincennes* in July 1988. All 290 civilians, including 66 children, perished due to the attack, which the US first had justified by arguing that the plane was believed to be a military fighter jet, was outside civilian flight corridors, and did not respond to radio calls. Subsequent investigations showed that the plane was in fact within civilian air corridors and was flying away from the American warship.⁷⁹ The Iranian government referred the matter to the International Court of Justice, arguing that the attack constituted gross negligence and recklessness amounting to an international crime.⁸⁰ The United States government has expressed regret for the loss of innocent life; it has, however, not apologized for the attack. From the Iranians' perspective what makes the whole scenario bizarre is that instead of accepting responsibility for the tragic event or apologizing to Iran, the US denied any wrongdoing and awarded medals to the crew of the USS *Vincennes*.⁸¹

The United States Navy was also involved in attacks against Iranian oil platforms as part of Operation Praying Mantis, the largest naval combat operation by the US since the Second World War.⁸² The attacks partially destroyed the Sassan and Sirri oil platforms, resulting in the loss of several ships and many lives. Iran sued for reparations at the International Court of Justice, stating that the United States breached the 1955 Treaty of Amity. The court dismissed the claim but noted, "The actions of the United States of America against Iranian oil platforms on October 19, 1987 (Operation Nimble Archer) and April 18, 1988 (Operation Praying Mantis) cannot be justified as measures necessary to protect the essential security interests of the United States of America."⁸³

Support for regional aggression against Iran

All revolutions produce upheaval and the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was no different. Coupled with the changes in national leadership, the revolutionary reorientation of Iran caused chaos in the army. The Shah's generals fled from the country, and "control and command" was almost non-existent. Saddam Hussein grasped this opportunity in September 1980 and launched an all-out assault against Iran. Although the US originally claimed neutrality in the war, it was increasingly supportive of the Iraqi war efforts, despite knowing Saddam Hussein and his lack of any moral principles allowed chemical and biological warfare-related dual Use exports to Iraq.⁸⁴

Tens of thousands of Iranian troops and civilians lost their lives and many more were horribly injured as a result of the use of chemical

bombs by Iraq. This US behavior was engraved in the minds of the Iranian leaders, and its scars have not disappeared to this date. While the US was on the verge of a military strike against Syria in September 2013 for the use of chemical weapons which killed 1,400 Syrians, it was the sole country that opposed (thus blocking) UN condemnation of Iraq's use of chemical weapons.⁸⁵ According to evidence disclosed in August 2013, the US was aware of Saddam Hussein's chemical attacks against Iran, the worst in history, yet continued to assist his government.⁸⁶

Cyber war

The United States and Israel launched the first state-planned cyber war in history against Iran's nuclear program. According to the *New York Times*,⁸⁷ from his first months in office, President Obama ordered acceleration of waves of cyber attacks against Iran. Sources told the *New York Times* that the US cyber attack, part of a larger sabotage operation called "Olympic Games," was a joint project of the US and Israel.

Following the *New York Times* report, leaders of the Senate and House intelligence committees released a statement noting, "We have become increasingly concerned at the continued leaks regarding sensitive intelligence programs and activities, including specific details of sources and methods."⁸⁸

Republicans accused the White House of "intentionally leaking information to enhance President Obama's image as a tough guy for the elections."⁸⁹ President Obama refuted the allegations. "The notion that my White House would purposely release classified national security information is offensive," he said.⁹⁰ "It's wrong." However, surprisingly, the substance of the *New York Times* report was not denied by the US administration.

Leading cyber experts maintain that the consequences of a massive, successful cyber attack on US infrastructure and/or the banking system would be devastating.⁹¹ Clearly, the adverse potential of a serious cyber attack is not a secret. To that end, two possible scenarios should be considered.

First, the cyber attacks against Iran are continuing. Beginning with the Stuxnet, the Flame, and later Mini-Flame hit Iran. According to the *Guardian*,⁹² "Two leading computer security laboratories—Kaspersky Lab and Symantec—have been studying a series of powerful cyber weapons used against targets including the Iranian nuclear program and Lebanese banks accused of laundering money for Iran and its ally Hezbollah. They are now convinced that all were probably created by a national government or governments working together."

Considering Iran's mistrust of the US, the known facts, and even unconfirmed information about these cyber attacks, Iran's government will almost certainly conclude that the strategy of "regime change" is in motion again, albeit a hi-tech version. They may opt to retaliate, possibly through the employment of foreign experts. Common sense dictates that such a trend could initiate a tit-for-tat chain of punitive events. While retaliations deteriorate, it is plausible, even likely, that a large scale, Iranian cyber attack against the US would ultimately provoke a military response against Iran.

We now realize that the tragic events of 9/11 prepared the ground and were used as the pretext to attack Iraq, despite the absence of any connection between Saddam's regime and the attacks on New York and Washington. In reality, there are some states and non-states hostile toward the Iranian government. Therefore, the second plausible scenario would be that a third party might stage a "false flag" attack, assigning blame to the Iranian government and justifying a US military response. There are active terrorist organizations within Iran that might be able to effect such a development with the help of regional adversaries to the Iranian government. In an atmosphere filled with hostility and distrust, and with emotions running high, a false flag attack would leave Tehran vulnerable to accusations of responsibility.

Misreading Iran: A Chronic Problem in US Politics

Closely reviewing the three periods of Iran-US relations leads us to a better understanding of the root causes for the failure of US policies during the second and third periods of relations between the two countries. One of the central factors that has not only created and perpetuated the hostile and uncompromising relationship between Iran and the US, but has also pushed Iran's domestic politics toward radicalization, is that US policy makers unceasingly misinterpret Iran. This is what led to the 1979 Revolution, planting the seeds of mistrust and hostility that remain in Iran-US relations.

Failure to understand Iran's culture of resistance to foreign domination and intervention culminated in the 1953 American-led coup. From that point onward, successive US administrations supported the Shah because they firmly believed that his survival was the key to blocking Soviet expansion, securing oil supplies, and reinforcing and expanding US intelligence capabilities on Iran's borders with the Soviet

Union. Over time, this view became so rigid and sacred that Americans would not even consider an alternative to the Shah. Instead, they relentlessly and unconditionally supported his regime to achieve these goals.

Astronomical arms sales were intended to bolster the Shah's regime but also significantly contribute to the US economy. In fiscal year 1977, US arms sales totaled \$9.9 billion worldwide. Of that, \$5.5 billion in sales went to Iran. Some 700,000 jobs were at stake in the United States.⁹³ Americans benefited from interfering in and dominating Iranian affairs in the short term. However, in-depth knowledge of Iranian history and culture would have revealed US short-sightedness. They should have known that disdain for foreign domination would dramatically damage US interests in the long term.

A major element that contributed to this misunderstanding of Iran was the total disconnectedness of Americans from realities on the ground in Iran. In 1977, one year before the eruption of the revolution, a CIA study analyzed the stability of the Shah's regime. The study concluded that, "The Shah seems to have no health or political problems at present that will prevent him from being the dominant figure in Iran into and possibly through the 1980s."⁹⁴ In fact, he suffered from cancer, and from serious political problems.

One year before the collapse of the Shah's regime, in a report titled "Iran after the Shah," the CIA declared that, "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a 'prerevolutionary' situation."⁹⁵ The report also suggested that "those who are in opposition, both violent and non-violent, do not have the capacity to be more troublesome."

In January 1979, only four days before the Shah's departure from Tehran and less than a month and a half before the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and the victory of the revolution, a CIA memorandum noted the protests. However, in its final assessment, it concluded that "Opposition to the Shah of Iran has never been a cohesive movement. It is a collection of widely disparate groups with differing ideologies and rival leaders."⁹⁶

Ironically, the CIA's knowledge of the dynamics of Iranian society was based largely on information from SAVAK, the Shah's intelligence and repression apparatus. An Iranian journalist astutely pointed out to an American expert, "You [Americans] thought you understood Iran because the Shah spoke English and because his cabinet had read Shakespeare ... You thought he was good because you could see a reflection of yourself in him but he understood Iran as little as you did, and that is why you both failed."⁹⁷

The Shah, dazzled by the industrial development of the West, and encouraged by Kennedy and Johnson, launched his ambitious westernization project. The project would try to “westernize” Iran and thus marginalize the traditional and Islamic cultures. This caused the emergence of a resistance movement by the religious conservatives led by the clergy.

In his fiery speech in 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini attacked the Shah primarily on two issues: the spread of moral corruption in the country, and the Shah’s submission to America and Israel. Following this speech, Ayatollah Khomeini was detained, sparking bloody riots throughout Iran. Many were killed and the leaders of the uprising were executed.

Following this upheaval, the US administration did not discourage the Shah or encourage him to rethink the dangerous path that he had taken. In a personal letter to the Shah, Kennedy instead wrote, “I share the regret you must feel over the loss of life connected with the recent unfortunate attempts to block your reform programs. I am confident, however, that such manifestations will gradually disappear as your people realize the importance of the measures you are taking to establish social justice and equal opportunity for all Iranians.” He added, “I also know that you would agree that a vigorous and expanding economy would provide the best backstop for the basic reform program you are undertaking.”⁹⁸

Kennedy emphatically impressed upon the Shah the advantages of the US economic model. Neither Kennedy nor Johnson recognized that the Shah’s program of westernization began to isolate him from his former conservative supporters and from the clergy.⁹⁹ Not only was he isolating himself, but as time went on, he grew more and more aggressive due to an overconfidence that the American support engendered in him. A year later, pursuant to Ayatollah Khomeini’s exile in 1964, westernization programs, and simultaneous attacks on Islamic traditions, what the Shah called *erteja-e siah* (black bashful) was intensified.

The Westernization project started with “The White Shah–People Revolution”¹⁰⁰ and then evolved into, “Reaching the Gates of the Great Civilization.”¹⁰¹ From the cultural perspective the project climaxed in the Shiraz Festival of Arts (*jashn-e honar-e Shiraz*)¹⁰² as well as the Great Celebration of 2,500 years of monarchy¹⁰³ in Iran.

Anthony Parsons, the then British ambassador to Iran, described in his memoir a bizarre scene at the Shiraz Festival of 1977:

As I have mentioned before, the Shiraz International Festival had

for many years been a subject of controversy because of the startling nature of some of the avant-garde performances staged in a traditional Muslim environment. Brazilian dancers biting the heads off live chickens and the presentation of the Shi'ite passion play, the *Tā'ziye*, as a stage performance for the entertainment of a mainly foreign audience are two examples which come to mind. The Shiraz Festival of 1977 excelled itself in its insults to Iranian moral values. For example, according to an eye-witness, a play was enacted which represented, as I was told, the evils of military rule and occupation. The theatre company had booked a shop in the main shopping street of Shiraz for the performance, which was played half inside the shop and half on the pavement outside. One scene, played on the pavement, involved a rape which was performed in full (no pretense) by a man (either naked or without any trousers, I forget which) on a woman who had had her dress ripped off her by her attacker. The denouement of the play, also acted on the pavement, included a scene where one of the characters dropped his trousers and inserted a stage pistol up his backside, presumably in order to add verisimilitude to his suicide. The effect of this bizarre and disgusting extravaganza on the good citizens of Shiraz, going about their evening shopping, can hardly be imagined. This grotesquerie aroused a storm of protest, which reached the press and television. I remember mentioning it to the Shah, adding that, if the same play had been put on, say, in the main street of Winchester (Shiraz is the Iranian equivalent of a cathedral city), the actors and sponsors would have found themselves in trouble. The Shah laughed indulgently.¹⁰⁴

The regime intensified its attempts to revitalize a partly fabricated history of monarchy in Iran and promote chauvinistic sentiments toward the history of Iran that predated Islam. While the history books at schools as well as the state media relentlessly promoted the "2,500 years of monarchy" history, beginning with the reign of Cyrus the Great (590/580 BC–530 BC), the reality was that for at least six centuries, Muslim-Arab Caliphates ruled Iran between the seventh and thirteenth centuries.

The official culture that the regime promoted was assembled in parts taken from Iran's ancient history but also from the West. This culture clashed with the religious values of the traditional society. Americans were completely out of touch with this aspect of Iranian society. The religious conservatives' worldviews, their demands, their

aspirations, and most importantly their strength and potential in formulating the political equations, were wholly foreign to the US leadership.

America's push for westernization in Iran was also accompanied by a sudden increase in the university student population both inside and outside Iran. This new social force would gradually become the center of protest against the Shah's iron-fist policies. They were the avant-garde of society who would demand freedom. They would protest against rampant corruption in the privileged aristocracy, against eclecticism, and against nepotism. The fundamental problem was that while those connected to the regime enjoyed wealth and high positions, the rest of the people were treated as second-class citizens.

By the beginning of the 1970s, Iran's major universities were producing an army of writers, painters, artists, and poets who demanded change: freedom of expression, equal opportunity for all, and an end to the American domination. In tandem with students inside Iran, Iranian students in Europe and the United States organized themselves within leftist and Islamic organizations all aiming to topple the Shah. As the intellectuals'/students' movement gained momentum, SAVAK began to confront them in a more brutal fashion. The intellectuals and students viewed America's support for the Shah as support for the evil actions carried out by the SAVAK—and they were not wrong.

“Direct links between the CIA and Savak developed to the point that in 1972 the CIA was actually training 400 Savak operatives at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia.”¹⁰⁵ In May 1977, shortly after William Sullivan was appointed as ambassador to Iran, he met with President Carter and his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. During that meeting, Sullivan asked Carter that, given the human rights situation in Iran and SAVAK's reputation of using brutality against the dissent, whether the cooperation between the CIA and SAVAK should continue. Carter responded that he had examined the issue and come to the conclusion that the intelligence that the US received was so critical that SAVAK-CIA cooperation should continue.¹⁰⁶

Even the assessment that if the Iranian people become materially better off, opposition to the Shah's regime would diminish or disappear was inaccurate. The cultural character of resistance to and rebellion against injustice and inequality had been a feature of social and political change throughout the history of Iran. This does not mean that material factors played no role in social and political change. It only

means that Iran's society was sensitive to the notions of inequality and injustice. The post-Islam history of Iran was full of bloody movements rising against inequality and social injustice.

Understanding the role of the clerics in Iranian politics

I am convinced that Americans do not understand how the revolution happened, or how the clergy operate in Iranian society; in short "how the nuts and bolts work." Since the 1979 Revolution, clerics have held a dominant role in ruling Iran. Because of this, it is not surprising that the US and the West have failed to deal with the Iranian government. The Islamic Republic of Iran represents the world's first experience during the modern era of a government shaped by and founded upon the paradigm of "political Shia," dominated by the clergy. Therefore, understanding the clergy's role in Iranian society has become essential in order to deal effectively with Iran. At the same time, it is equally important for those clerics to gain a better understanding of the West in order to best serve Iran's interests in today's world.

America's failure to understand the clergy's role in Iranian society has been a major drawback to analyzing Iranian society. American analysts and policy-makers do not give credence to the Shia clergy in Iran's political calculations. This might be because their knowledge and understanding of the Islamic world was primarily derived from the Sunni Arab world, with which they are more familiar. But there are major differences between these two Muslim religious schools.

The Shia clergy have historically been a powerful social force as protectors of the masses against the actions of the state, as well as in resistance to foreign domination. The organization encompasses the largest cities and the smallest villages. Unlike Sunni Islam, religious authority in the Shia clergy is centralized. Through Reference(s) of Imitation (*Maraje-e Taqlid*), the clerics have an organic relationship with each other. Clerics can work in harmony together and mobilize the masses to achieve one or more goals set by the *Marja-e Taqlid*, the authority to be followed, the highest-ranking authorities of the Twelver Shia community.

One of the biggest and most powerful ideological political parties in the world is arguably the Shia cleric organization that has been shrouded in mystery. While the function, structure, and influence is unlike mainstream party political models, its influence and capability far surpasses others.

A clear manifestation of the dynamics of clerical organization was seen in Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Shia clerical establishment played the major role in galvanizing the masses to revolutionary zeal, ultimately bringing down the Shah. During the revolution, messages from Ayatollah Khomeini, the highest Shia authority, were disseminated first from Iraq, then Paris, and finally, upon his return to Iran, from Tehran. These messages promoted and invited the masses to resist and topple the Shah's regime.

No political group, movement, or party could match this widely extended, yet naturally centralized organization. It is no wonder that backed by such a network, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to assume an unmatched position among all opposition groups, from left to right, nationalist, Marxist or otherwise, to lead the revolution.

To better understand the vast influence of this religious establishment, in addition to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the anti-imperialist tobacco boycott and the oil nationalization movements provide some insight.

Following Nasir al-Din Shah, the Qajar ruler of Iran, making the decision to grant a monopoly of the Iranian tobacco trade to the British in 1891, sparked widespread protests as the population saw the decision as a clear violation of the sovereignty of Iran. Nasir al-Din Shah stood his ground on this decision. By issuing a *fatwa*, or religious edict, Grand Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi forbade the use of tobacco as a religious duty. Things took a new turn, and even the servants of the Shah refused to prepare his pipe. Ultimately, the Shah was powerless to stop the boycott and was forced to nullify the agreement with the British.

The tobacco boycott also highlights the strength of anti-foreign-domination sentiments in Iran. These sentiments mobilized nineteenth-century Iranians in defiance of the British incursion, and are deeply rooted in Iran's history, but have yet to be fully appreciated by the US government, even up to today.

The Shia clergy also played an integral role in the oil nationalization movement, opening a new chapter in Iran's recent history in the early 1950s. While the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran Mohammad Mossadegh has been rightfully credited with championing the cause of oil nationalization, the role of the Shia religious establishment has been less recognized. Mossadegh received significant support from the revered Ayatollah Sayyed Abol Qasem Kashani, a leading figure in the anti-imperialist movement against the British.¹⁰⁷ Kashani's popularity was matched only by Mossadegh.

It has been noted that when Kashani was permitted to return to Iran from exile in 1950, he received a hero's welcome.¹⁰⁸ Mossadegh was among the massive crowd that welcomed him. On his way from Tehran's Mehrabad Airport to his home, "the crowds became delirious, sometimes even lifting his car off the road."¹⁰⁹ With his patronage and support the oil nationalization, Kashani transformed the movement into a widespread struggle that engulfed the country.¹¹⁰

The turning point in the struggle came with declaration of a *fatwa* by Ayatollah Kashani on December 21, 1950 that directed all "sincere Muslims and patriotic citizens to fight against the enemies of Islam and Iran by joining the nationalization struggle."¹¹¹ Within days, thousands joined Mossadegh in the streets of Tehran, and three months later the Iranian oil industry was nationalized.

Kashani's influence also manifested itself during the events of June 1952. Following Mossadegh's dismissal by the Shah and the appointment of Ghavam-o-Saltaneh as the new prime minister, Ghavam asked Khashani for his support in shaping an anti-Mossadegh front. He offered Kashani and his close supporters a significant role in the government, but Kashani refused the deal. In a harsh letter to Hossein Ala, former Iranian ambassador to the United States, Kashani threatened that "Unless Mossadegh is reappointed in twenty-four hours, I will personally aim the sharp edge of the revolution toward the court itself." Mossadegh was reappointed that night.¹¹²

Although tension and differences were to emerge between Mossadegh and Kashani, resulting in the failure of the anti-imperialist movement of the Iranian people, Khashani's influence and prominent role in the history of oil nationalization is not disputed by historians.

The decisive role of clerics in Iran has been the driving force behind the Iranian political establishment's resistance to American pressure. The culture of resistance originates from Islamic, and more specifically, Shia teachings. The culture urges people to *resist* when they are placed under pressure and humiliation. Drawing upon Shia teachings, clergy members, including two of Iran's successive supreme leaders, have constantly preached about the superiority of believers (*momenin*) over worldly people (*aafiat-talaban*) in defending their values. Meanwhile, Ayatollah Khamenei has portrayed himself as a symbol of resistance to the United States and Israel. His ruling power and stature, as Guardian Jurist (*vali-e faqih*) and a symbol of resistance to the US and Israel, among his own followers, including the Muslim (particularly Shia) world, would dissipate or dissolve if

he surrendered to US pressures under humiliating conditions. It is no wonder that the language of threat and intimidation has indeed been a major obstacle to talks and negotiations, heightening hostility between the two states.

Chapter 2

HOSTAGE CRISIS: DENOUEMENT OF MISTRUST, MISPERCEPTIONS, AND MISANALYSIS

The Episode

The American Embassy in Tehran is situated in a large, park-like 27-acre lot on Taleghani Street (formerly Takhte-Jamshid). Construction of the elongated, two-storey brick building was completed in 1951. The architecture of the building mimicked that of American high schools, and staff referred to it as Henderson High, a reference to Loy W. Henderson, the first American ambassador to Iran, who started his work in that building. Apart from the main building, there are several other buildings including the ambassador's residence and the consular section, as well as a pool and tennis court.

When the embassy first opened, Takhte-Jamshid, a street running east-west, was one of the northernmost streets of Tehran, but by 1979, due to Tehran's expansion, it was closer to the city center than to its northern limit. When the compound was first constructed, it was enclosed by fences rather than walls. People walking in Takhte-Jamshid Street could see the lush, green American Embassy complex from outside. Conversely, the Russian (Soviet) and British embassies looked mysterious and nondescript from outside. This exuded the impression to Iran's people that Americans were open and frank; different from the British and Russians who had historically demonstrated an interventionist character to the Iranians. And up to that point, Iranians were right in their judgment.

Fast-forward 28 years. It is October 1979. The spaces and streets around the American Embassy are filled with people discussing what should be done in response to the US allowing the Shah to visit for medical purposes. Very few amongst them believed that the purpose of the Shah's visit to the US was to receive medical attention. The Shah entered the US on October 22—eight months after the revolution on February 11, 1979.

Despite strong warnings from the US Embassy in Tehran, President Carter decided to admit the Shah. From the perspective of the US Embassy staff in Tehran, it was absolutely the worst thing that the US president could do, simultaneously preventing the improvement of relations between the two countries and jeopardizing the safety and security of Americans in Iran.¹

Young Iranians, whose convictions ranged from those sympathizing with left communist groups to radical Muslims, gathered in front of the embassy's main door on a daily basis and shouted slogans against the Shah and the US, demanding the Shah's extradition. It felt as if that feverish, revolutionary climate would inevitably spiral into disaster. The number of protestors increased each day, reaching several thousand toward the end of October.

In July 1979, the Islamic associations of 22 universities held a gathering at Tehran Polytechnic University (now Amir Kabir University) to create an organization that would "protect the achievements" of the revolution. A manifesto was also released pursuant to the unification of all Islamic associations under one umbrella, thus coordinating their goals and actions.

The first elected Central Council of the new organization, then called the Office for Strengthening of Unity between the Islamic Associations of the Universities and Theological Seminaries (later simply called the Office for Strengthening of Unity or OSU), consisted of Mohsen Mirdamadi, Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, Habibollah Bitaraf, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mohammad Ali Sayyed Nejad. From the OSU's inception, it was apparent that Mirdamadi, Asgharzadeh, and Bitaraf were the key figures who dominated decision-making within the Central Council. In practice, the representatives of three universities—the University of Tehran, Shariff University, and Amir Kabir University—dominated and crafted OSU policies. Key to connecting the OSU with Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Revolution's leader, was a radical cleric called Mohammad Mousavi Khomeiniha.

The person who first brought up the idea of seizing the American Embassy was Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, while Bitaraf and Mirdamadi also supported him. During August and September, Ahmadinejad argued that communists were the main enemies of the Islamic Revolution and that the USSR Embassy should be seized. One week before seizure of the US Embassy, the aforementioned three individuals met with a cleric Mousavi Khomeiniha at his office in the Iranian national TV headquarters where he supervised the TV programs as Ayatollah Khomeini's representative.

The purpose of the meeting was to ask Khomeini to seek Ayatollah Khomeini's opinion regarding the plan. Khomeini welcomed the plan but rejected the students' strategy. Khomeini asserted that Ayatollah Khomeini faced political constraints which prevented him from approving the seizure, proposing that the group go ahead with the plan and then seek Ayatollah Khomeini's response. If he supported the group's actions, they would remain. If he objected, they would vacate the compound. In any case, Khomeini argued, the students would have expressed their opposition to American policies, thus attracting the world's attention to their cause.

The American Embassy had actually been occupied in February 1979, when leftist groups were involved. After Ayatollah Khomeini was informed about the event, he ordered the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan to force the leftist revolutionaries out of the embassy. In response to the OSU leaders' concern about repeating the February episode's reaction, Khomeini argued that this situation was quite different. First, because by this time the Shah had been accepted on US soil, and second, because the students were devout Muslims not communists. So the group of four, which now included Khomeini, collectively decided to execute the plan without informing any high ranking officials or other influential figures including Ayatollah Khomeini. The details of the episode, as years later were presented to me by a number of students involved in the seizure of the embassy, were as follows.

The group formed reconnaissance units shortly after that meeting. One unit entered the compound as visa applicants. They were tasked with preparing a sketch of the compound including the buildings. Another unit assembled on nearby rooftops overlooking the embassy. They assessed the number of security personnel, including US Marines and Iranian police, guarding the embassy, and drew a diagram of building locations from above and the locations where cars were parked. Another unit located all of the entrances to the compound.

Two more events accelerated seizure of the US Embassy. News broke on November 1 of a meeting between Iran's Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, and his Foreign Minister, Ebrahim Yazdi, with President Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski in Algiers. Bazargan and Yazdi were both considered as pro-Western, liberal figures, while Brzezinski was perceived as a mysterious figure in Carter's administration. All of them were attending the events marking the 25th anniversary of the Algerian Revolution. News of this meeting provoked a huge sense of resentment among all revolutionary factions, including radical Muslim students, then the dominant political force

on the streets of Tehran. The next day, Ayatollah Khomeini in a fiery statement to the clergy and students, implored them to “expand with all their might their criticism against the United States.” Ayatollah Khomeini insisted that the US should freeze the Shah’s assets and extradite him back to Iran.

The statements left no doubt among leaders of the OSU that it was time for action. The Central Council of the OSU decided to select 100 to 150 trusted students from each of four universities—the University of Tehran, Amir Kabir University, Shariff University, and the National University of Iran (later Shahid Beheshti)—for the operation. A small committee appointed by the Central Council of the OSU in each of the four universities would interview potential student candidates to execute the embassy plan. They would ask them only two questions: “Can you stay out of your home or the university dormitory 48 hours?,” and, “Will you participate in a protest move against the United States?”

Those who said “yes” to both questions were asked to attend a briefing meeting. At the meeting, they were informed of the plan to seize the American Embassy. The embassy’s occupation was planned to last between 48 and 72 hours. The seizure’s aim was to attract international attention to the issue of a perceived US conspiracy against the popular Iranian Revolution.

November 4, 1979 was the first anniversary of high school students’ demonstrations at the University of Tehran, protesting against the Shah, which ended in the killing of a number of the students. As a tribute to their memory, a massive demonstration was organized. In order to be distinguished from other demonstrators, the 400 students who were designated to participate in the seizure of the embassy carried a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini with an armband on which it was written, “Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line.”

They gathered at an intersection one kilometer east of the embassy at 6.30 in the morning, and final briefings were presented by the leaders. At 10.30 the group walked toward the embassy, feigning an intention to join the demonstrators at Tehran University a few kilometers west of the American Embassy. Only 50 were intended to enter the embassy, the rest remaining outside to prevent the masses from joining their action, which would only create chaos inside the compound.

The students continued on their way, passing the main entrance of the embassy. After walking 50 meters beyond the main door, embassy guards were caught by surprise as protesters returned to attack the embassy’s gate. A few female students had hidden metal cutters under their long veils (*chadors*). The gate’s chains were quickly cut and opened while others

climbed over the walls. As soon as the main group entered the embassy, the gate was secured again with locks and chains prepared in advance.

The students broke into the main building where they faced marines who guarded the embassy and were ready to shoot at them. A male and a female student shouted in English, "We are not here to hurt you! We just want to sit-in!" The marines, afraid of the seemingly angry students, shot tear gas. But because they were inside the building, the tear gas penetrated upstairs and throughout the building, making the situation intolerable for staff and the marines themselves.

The students now began to search for secret documents that would reveal the espionage operations of the embassy, but found nothing. Another small group entered a corridor at the end of which there was a steel wall. I was told by the witnesses that they heard a low noise behind the wall and suspected that there was something happening behind it. They concluded that it might be a door rather than a wall, and asked one of the hostages to open the door, as it was coded in a complex way.

When the door opened, their jaws dropped. Before them, the students saw tons of secret documents in the form of papers, microfilms, and microfiches. The noise they had heard had been shredders and incinerators. The students shut down the machines and guided the operators out of the room. Later, they painstakingly reconstructed those documents that had already been shredded. By 1.30 in the afternoon, the radical students controlled the entire compound.

The streets surrounding the embassy were now filled with thousands of angry people chanting against the United States, with their fists clenched, demanding the Shah's extradition. Thousands remained on the streets that night and for several nights after. The atmosphere was so hysterical that an outside observer might have wondered if calm could ever be restored.

As I was told by Ayatollah Beheshti, at the time the second most powerful man in the establishment after Ayatollah Khomeini, no one knew about the plan. He was shocked. Ayatollahs Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khamenei, Iran's current Supreme Leader, were both in Mecca in Saudi Arabia as pilgrims. The Council of Revolution and the government also did not know about the planned seizure. Ayatollah Beheshti also told me that the Iranian leaders' immediate reaction was to argue that the students should evacuate the embassy. But what would transpire next changed the direction of events.

Ebrahim Yazdi, who had just come back from Algeria, rushed to the holy city of Qom, where Ayatollah Khomeini resided. Ayatollah Khomeini's first question was, "Who are these people?" Yazdi told

him that they were students who introduced themselves as Ayatollah Khomeini's followers. After Yazdi explained the situation and the way the incident could become problematic internationally, Ayatollah Khomeini said firmly, "Kick them out."²

While Yazdi drove back, Khoeihi called Sayyed Ahmad Khomeini, the Ayatollah's son and confidant. Khoeihi assured Sayyed Ahmad that all of the students were devout Muslims who truly were the Ayatollah Khomeini's followers. He added that following Ayatollah Khomeini's statement about intensifying resistance to US intervention, the students decided to occupy the embassy in order to seek the Shah's extradition and to stop US intervention in Iranian affairs. To assess the real situation on the ground, Ahmad Khomeini flew to Tehran by helicopter.

When the crowd saw Ahmad Khomeini, they hoisted him above their heads while chanting in support of Ayatollah Khomeini and against the US. The frenzy on the streets shocked Ahmad Khomeini. On his return to Qom that same night, he reported to Ayatollah Khomeini about the hysteria in the streets of Tehran. He also reported on the mass of secret documents seized by the students, and the attempted destruction of many of the confidential papers.³

The next day, November 5, Ayatollah Khomeini called the US "The Great Satan," and the embassy "a den of espionage." He elaborated: "That center that our youth went to, as we were informed, has been a center for espionage and conspiracy." Tehran no longer controlled the course of events. As anti-American hysteria increased, with the almost daily revelations by the students on national television of evidence of American espionage and America's efforts to intervene in Iran's affairs, it was almost impossible, even for Ayatollah Khomeini, to end the crisis. In an interview in November 2013 Asgharzadeh said, "We, ourselves, became hostages of hostage-taking." Ayatollah Beheshti told me that with the revelation of these espionage documents, no one could take any action to resolve the situation.

In 2010, the latest edition of *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den (Asnad-e laneh-e Jasusi)* was published by the Political Studies and Research Institute in Iran. It comprised eight volumes and approximately 8,500 pages in total. These books featured telegrams, correspondence, and reports from the US State Department and Central Intelligence Agency, revealing detailed US intelligence about political figures in Iran. There were also accounts of meetings between US intelligence agents and liberal/moderate elements of the Bazargan cabinet, and detailed narratives of at least three CIA agents who were involved with an information-gathering project titled the Special

Reporting Facility (SRF). Some experts maintain that these documents “reveal nothing more than the routine, prudent espionage conducted at diplomatic missions everywhere.”⁴

A few days later, the moderate cabinet of Mehdi Bazargan resigned, thus beginning the tumultuous years of Iran–US relations. Nobody could have imagined that the aftershocks from that earthquake would last more than 30 years.

The Role of Mistrust, Misperception, and Misanalysis in the Iran–US Conflict

The US lost Iran with the 1979 Revolution and fall of the Shah. It lost its privileged position in the Iranian political and economic systems. The cancellation of \$7 billion worth of unfulfilled arms contracts would seriously affect the US balance of payments. Americans also lost two sensitive listening posts used for monitoring the Soviet ballistic missiles program in order to verify the Soviets’ commitment to the newly signed SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) Treaty. Furthermore, they no longer possessed reliable human intelligence in Iran, leaving them ignorant of Iranian current events.

In the meantime, Iran was determined to maintain relations with the US, but with several conditions. The US would have to recognize Iran’s new government and accept its Islamic identity, accept a mutually respectful relationship, abandon the patron–client relationship model, and genuinely adopt a non-interference policy toward Iran. From the Islamic Republic’s inception, Ayatollah Khomeini did not ban a relationship with the US. He only disallowed relationships with South Africa, which was an apartheid regime, and Israel. All of the influential, high-ranking officials, including Ayatollah Beheshti, as well as the provisional government, sought a relationship with the US. Let us not forget that the first time the embassy was seized, in February 1979, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who ordered its evacuation, and the revolutionary guards secured the location.

Despite Iran’s efforts to maintain a relationship, the US was transfixed by the Cold War and was unable or unwilling to conceive of anything other than a means to meddle in Iran’s politics in order to confront Soviet expansionism and protect US economic interests in Iran. The sudden rise of communist influence in Afghanistan and the existence of a pro-Soviet Iraq only made America more determined to pursue this line.

The backbone of Bazargan's administration consisted of highly educated, pro-Western, liberal-minded personalities, some of whom had lived in and been educated in the West. From the formation of Bazargan's provisional government, there was tension between his administration and their opponents. Bazargan and his administration believed that the revolution had come to an end and argued that it was time to build relations with foreign countries, particularly the West. Ayatollah Khomeini's view was that the revolution was incomplete, and that Iran still needed to root out US interference in its politics. I believe that Iran could have constructed a diplomatic relationship with the US and at the same time prevented its domestic affairs being influenced by Washington. Even during the height of the Cold War between the communist bloc and the Western bloc, the US not only negotiated with its adversaries, but also maintained diplomatic and economic relations with them.

In order to reduce tensions, the US sought to foster a link to the pro-Western elements of Iran's new system. However, what they failed to understand was that executing these efforts behind the backs of the revolutionaries would be interpreted as conspiring to undermine the revolution and its leadership. To have been successful, the US should have pursued the opposite track: they should have advanced a policy of openness, thus eliminating deep-rooted Iranian suspicions about American objectives.

A closer look at the root causes of the embassy crisis is of paramount importance. This incident marks the beginning of protracted hostilities between Iran and the US. The combination of perceptions and misperceptions of the influential actors within the two states, misanalysis of the situation in Iran by the American policy-makers and experts, and an accumulation of decades of perceived betrayals have resulted in profound mutual mistrust, and have been largely responsible for the failure of all initiatives aimed at détente and peace between Iran and the US. Let us take a more in-depth look at the hostage crisis, and observe how these factors played a role in bringing about that event.

To begin with, Carter and his administration completely failed to grasp the profound, anti-American sentiment that dominated the revolutionary climate within Iran in the aftermath of its 1979 Revolution. Hamilton Jordan, Carter's advisor during the hostage crisis, admitted that the administration "didn't understand that country [meaning Iran] and its people."⁵

A few weeks before the embassy takeover, when Ebrahim Yazdi was informed by Henry Precht, chief of the Iran desk at the US State

Department, about the Shah's pending arrival in the US, he had warned Precht that "You are playing with fire."⁶ For a while, Carter resisted the notion of admitting the Shah even though he was pressured by Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller (then Chairman and the CEO of the Chase Manhattan Bank), and Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor. In October, Carter is quoted saying to his top advisors, "What are you guys going to advise me to do if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?"⁷

Nevertheless, his comments a few weeks after the seizure of the embassy indicated how little he knew about what was going on in Iran. In a news conference in February 1980, he was asked by a reporter if "it was proper for the United States to restore the Shah to the throne in 1953 against Iran's popular will." Carter replied, "That is ancient history, and I don't think it's appropriate or helpful for me to go into the propriety of something that happened 30 years ago."⁸

Carter was dead wrong. The memory of the 1953 coup was so alive that every move of the United States was assessed and considered in the light of its involvement in the 1953 coup. Another misanalysis on Carter's part was that despite his objection to the admission of the Shah, out of fear of the embassy being "overrun," he relied upon guarantees from Iran's provisional government, namely Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, that the embassy's security would be ensured. Due to Carter's ignorance of Iran's political environment, he and his administration overestimated the authority of Bazargan's administration, and underestimated the power of the radicals.

Americans had already experienced one takeover of the embassy, in February. At that time, Yazdi was able to kick the attackers out. But in the months that followed, many things had changed. Iran's large cities housed competing political groups, some of them armed. In minority areas, there were tensions and armed struggles. Many perceived the United States, and specifically its embassy, to be at the root of the unrest. Counseled by the experience of 1953, many Iranians viewed the widespread turmoil as American preparation for bringing down the revolution.

Generating more hostility among Iran's leadership was their claim that American statements contained no sign of recognition or support for the revolution. The US was also not willing to condemn its previous policies. Iran's leadership argued that Americans were not prepared to supply the spare parts and arms worth \$400 million for which Iran had already paid. There also were no signs of the return of the Shah's or his family's funds that had been illegally seized from the Iranian nation.

In May 1979, Senator Jacob Javits, whose wife allegedly had financial connections to the Shah's system, sponsored a Senate resolution condemning executions by the Iranian government. Javits accused the Iranian government of killing Jews after they executed Habib Elghanian, a Jewish businessman. That condemnation stirred a great deal of resentment amongst the Iranian leaders. One revolutionary official told me that Elghanian was the only Jew who was executed at that time, and the reason was not because he was a Jew, otherwise thousands of Jews who lived in Iran should have been excuted. Rather it was because he had close ties to the former regime.

The Carter administration also condemned the executions. The issue of human rights was a major element in Carter's foreign policy. "Carter had refused to continue the past practice of overlooking the human rights abuses" of US allies "and was particularly tough" on a handful of countries, including Iran under the Shah's rule.

Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's revolutionaries viewed this stance as the continuation of US interference in Iran's domestic affairs. This perception would impact the Iranian leadership in two ways. First, they thought that Americans refused to acknowledge Iranian national identity, which entailed rejection of foreign domination, and had been a major cause of the revolution. And second, this perception raised fears that the US would not change its policy of interference in Iran's internal affairs. Interestingly, both of these perceptions persist today.

Misperception was not limited to the Americans. Iranians became extremely paranoid as soon as the Shah entered the US in October 1979. Many, including the radical Muslim students, did not believe that the Shah was ill. Ayatollah Khomeini became extremely angry, his statements turning increasingly hostile. He, like many other Iranians, firmly believed that another 1953 was in the making. The students believed that the admission of the Shah to the United States signaled another coup to be imminent. I can attest that Muslim students concluded that the revolution was under serious threat, and that by seizing the embassy they could prevent a repeat of 1953, when the American Embassy had played a major role in organizing the coup. The whole thing was a misperception. The ailing Shah was terminally ill and died less than a year after the hostage-taking.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the unpublicized 75-minute meeting between Bazargan, Yazdi, and Brzezinski in Algeria. Students were afraid that liberals would compromise with the US, thus paving the way for a US comeback and its interference in Iran's affairs. The reality is that Bazargan advocated a "step-by-step" (*gam be gam*)

policy to bring change to the structure of the government and the management of the country. He criticized radical changes and viewed them as counterproductive.

This view was discordant with the revolutionary climate which dominated the country and demanded swift and structural changes. Bazaragn also misread the situation and met with Brzezinski without consultation with the Council of Revolution. Bazargan and his colleagues criticized the interference of religion in the management of the state, directly conflicting with Iran's leader of the revolution. Bazargan later wrote: "The goal of establishing the provisional (or transitional) government was to serve Iran via Islam and due to Islam's order, while Mr. Khomeini had adopted [the policy of] serving Islam via Iran to accomplish his own mission."¹⁰ A conflict clearly existed between two worldviews: Bazargan was a liberal reformist; the Ayatollah Khomeini was a revolutionary.

Many experts have hypothesized that the hostage-taking event was more about factional infighting between radicals and moderates than the fear of another US intervention or the return of American influence and meddling in Iran's politics. But this argument is flawed on a number of counts.

First, neither Ayatollah Khomeini nor any other high-ranking official, revolutionary or otherwise, had any prior knowledge about the plan of seizing the embassy. Second, Bazargan had already resigned three times, the last time being on November 2, that is, two days before the incident, and was just waiting for Ayatollah Khomeini's acceptance of his resignation. Also, Bazargan was not a fighter or a revolutionary. He was a religious-liberal nationalist and mellow-tempered technocrat who desired to serve his country. He was not "clinging" to power and there was no need to force him out. Even if radicals had wanted to force him out, it would have been mainly because of a fear of US influence being restored. They were afraid that the revolution was in jeopardy.

Third, Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, mastermind of the seizure, said in a 2011 interview that, "The move of the students in seizing the American Embassy was entirely a student movement. It was amateurish and unprofessional which had nothing to do with either opposition to the provisional government, nor was it designed based on an ideological plan. I admit that there was a negative perception toward the American policies ... however, the central problem that led to that incident was nothing but the admission of the Shah to America."¹¹

Some other people argue that Muslim students were afraid that leftists would initiate a seizure of the embassy by taking advantage of

the anti-American environment. But it is important to remember that the whole plan revolved around a 48-hour occupation of the embassy. They were not planning or expecting to stay in the embassy more than 48 to 72 hours. And what could be achieved in such a short period in terms of defeating the leftist groups? Nothing would have dramatically changed in their favor.

Although the hostage crisis later stood for something much larger than a student uprising, the initial motivation was a misperception on the Iranian side that another coup was in the making, and on the American side, a misanalysis of the situation in Iran.

Herbert Kelman¹² rightfully states that “international conflict is a *process driven by collective needs and fears*, rather than entirely a product of rational calculation of objective national interest on the part of political decision makers” (emphasis in the original).¹³ According to John Burton,¹⁴ another prominent international relations scholar, “These needs include not only material ones, such as food, shelter, physical safety, and physical well-being but also psychological needs, such as identity, security, recognition, autonomy, self-esteem, and a sense of justice.”¹⁵

Mistrust also played a key role in the embassy’s seizure. The admitted role of the US in the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran’s popular Prime Minister, is central to the debate on mistrust between Iran’s post-revolution government and the US. Resisting the Shah’s policies of Westernization, an Islamic movement under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini emerged. Iranians believed that they were victims of US policies. Meanwhile, Ayatollah Khomeini’s perception of the US, formed by his own experience in confrontation with the American-supported regime of the Shah, was dominant in forming his mistrust of the United States. Nikki Keddie,¹⁶ an Iran expert, maintains that, “for every strange-seeming character trait [of the Iranians], as with ‘mistrust’ or ‘paranoia,’ one can nearly always find partially explanatory causes in Iranian history” (emphasis in the original).¹⁷

In September 1979, in an interview with an Italian journalist named Oriana Fallaci, Ayatollah Khomeini was asked if there was any good thing about the West, to which he replied, “We were bitten by the snake so we also fear a string that looks like a snake from afar ... now we have every reason to fear the West.”¹⁸ According to Robert Jervis, a professor of international affairs, “Historical analogies shape people’s, as well as decision makers’, understanding of politics ... This is especially relevant when people have first-hand experiences.”¹⁹ From the onset of the Islamic Republic, the fear of “regime change” shaped the Iranian

nezam's profound sense of mistrust of the United States. This fear was shared not only by Iran's leadership, but grassroots supporters of the system as well.

An unexpected consequence of the seizure of the American Embassy was the disclosure of classified documents, which served only to deepen Iranians' mistrust of the United States. Not all the documents were related to CIA operations in Iran, some instead focusing on the Soviet Union, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel. But overall, the documents reinforced Iranian fears about America.

Among the published volumes were copious CIA documents indicating efforts to generate covert ties with Iranian officials, two of them code-named SDLURE and SDROTTER. The revelation of these documents solidified the perspective that was relayed to me by one of the prominent leaders of the revolution, that the United States was addicted to *khooye estekbari* (arrogant behavior) and thus could and would not leave Iran alone "until it is either able to actualize a permutation and transformation in the independence-seeking nature of the system, or topple the *nezam* altogether."

One further development raised the Iranians' mistrust to a new level. A few days after the embassy was seized, President Carter froze billions of dollars' worth of Iran's assets in the United States. This move helped Rockefeller's Chase Manhattan Bank by preventing the Iranians from pulling out their funds out of the bank. The Chase move stunned Iranians and rumors began to spread among them that Rockefeller's direct involvement in the Shah's admission to the United States had been carefully planned to provoke the embassy's seizure and in response freeze Iran's money. This view was reinforced when the Iranians found some correspondence from the embassy that indicated that the Carter administration had been warned about the danger of the seizure of the embassy in response to the Shah's admission to America.²⁰

In his memoirs, Rockefeller wrote that the Iranian "government did reduce the balances they maintained with us during the second half of 1979, but in reality they had simply returned to their historic level of about \$500 million."²¹ Rockefeller added that "Carter's 'freeze' of official Iranian assets protected our position, but no one at Chase played a role in convincing the administration to institute it."²²

There is another largely ignored element that reinforced mistrust in Iran-US relations. A study of Iranian culture reveals a deep rooted "culture of conspiracy." This socio-psychological characteristic has largely influenced Iranian culture as well as politics. According to Ahmad Ashraf, an Iranian sociologist, the popularity of conspiracy

theories has deep historical roots arising from a combination of complex historical experiences. In particular, Ashraf contends that “since the beginning of the 20th century Persians from all walks of life and all ideological orientations have relied on conspiracy theories as a basic mode of understanding politics and history.”²³

The great powers’ covert interventions in the country’s affairs have been responsible for the formation of this worldview. According to another Iranian sociologist, the late Mehrdad Mashayekhi, this relatively high degree of mistrust of Iranian’ culture is variously referred to by observers as “paranoid styles,” “conspiracy-mindedness,” “xenophobia,” and “suspiciousness.”²⁴ Events that followed the Islamic Revolution, including the documents seized from the American Embassy, as well as the US policies, only solidified this socio-psychological streak.

The deep-rooted conspiracy illusion in Iranian culture is a notable factor in shaping the political worldview of both the common people and the elite.²⁵ Within this setting, it is understandable how the sense of mistrust may intensify when experiences and observational evidence, in the eyes of the Iranian leadership, seemed to validate their suspicions.

Since the hostage crisis, the US has never tried to address the issue of mistrust. On the contrary, it has used every opportunity to directly or indirectly suggest to the Islamic Republic that its survival is at stake unless it “behaves,” as the Americans wish. The deep mistrust of the United States, arising from a combination of the Iranian leadership’s historical experience, US coercive policies, and the culture of conspiracy, has been largely responsible for the failure of initiatives, negotiations, and outreaches, and for a lack of purposeful dialogue between Iran and the US. And in the absence of meaningful dialogue, it is unreasonable to expect any change in the mutually hostile position assumed by both governments. On the contrary, it is reasonable to expect the conflict to be prolonged.

It is undeniable that the hostage-taking incident created a sense of mistrust in the United States, exhibited in a questioning of the rationality of the Iranian government.

The 444-day Iranian hostage crisis humiliated America in the eyes of its own people and of those around the world, and created a perception of the Iranian government in the American political establishment that has continued to this day. As Sick explains, “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.”²⁶

Mistrust has assumed a life of its own in the relationship between Iran and the US, almost detached from material factors such as competition over power and interests. As Anthony Cordesman et al. maintain, “Both sides harbor both legitimate and exaggerated grievances that have reinforced mutual mistrust. This mistrust now affects every aspect of US–Iranian competition over energy, economics, trade, sanctions and the nuclear issue.”²⁷ The hostage crisis created a cycle of mistrust that has not been addressed, let alone broken, to this date. In fact, the cycle has probably only intensified due to issues such as Iran’s nuclear program. A consequence of this cycle has been the creation of what the Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, called a “wall of mistrust.”

Emergence of the “Enemy Narrative”

Associated with the embassy’s seizure, the “enemy narrative” emerged in the political discourse of the Iranian government and its leaders. This discourse has remained one of the central elements of Iran’s foreign policy. Many Western analysts indeed believe that the Iranian government uses the “enemy narrative” against the US (and the entire West) as a “justification for cracking down on any form of dissent or free expression.”²⁸ Ray Takeyh, an Iran expert, maintains that “Self-serving domestic calculations likely play a part in generating [the] conservatives’ statement about America’s permanent ideological hostility to Iran.” These assertions and related policies helped ... justify political repression in Iran.²⁹ In other words, the Iranian regime needs the US as a permanent enemy, otherwise its “ideological foundation will be weakened.”³⁰ However, this argument fails to convince.

First, in a “cold war” environment, where suspicion and mistrust dominate, it is more likely than not that Iran’s ruling elite will use the “enemy narrative” when and where it finds it applicable. Still, this is not a fabricated reaction. On the contrary, it reflects a combination of genuine fear, mistrust, maybe to some extent paranoia rooted in the culture of conspiracy referred to earlier. Iran’s government does not require access to confidential documents about US intentions to achieve regime change. Just reading the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* can serve to validate their fears. For example, an article in the *New York Times* observed that the Obama administration “[had] all but encouraged protestors [in Iran] to take to the streets”³¹ in the aftermath

of Iran's 2009 disputed presidential election. The report added that a senior administration official maintained that "This isn't a regime-change strategy. But it's fair to say that it's exploiting fractures that are already there."³²

Or, for instance, a further justification for Iranians to fear US intentions was the statement by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that "Security assurances are not on the table" in exchange for Iran halting its nuclear program.³³ One of Iran's high-ranking officials subsequently remarked to me that "There is no clearer way to say that our [i.e. the US's] strategic plan is to overthrow the *nezam* at some point."

Second, the notion that Iran requires a permanent enemy is in direct conflict with observations "on the ground." Iranian peace overtures have been made very public, including, for example, the "grand bargain" in 2003 which advanced a proposal for an all-encompassing peace with the United States. The US rejected this proposal outright. Iran cooperated closely with the US, offering intelligence and logistical support, as well as conducting a range of secret talks with US officials, before, during, and after the US-led operations in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban, also in the hope of normalizing relations. Again, in close cooperation with the US, Iran played a major role in the formation of the new Afghan government at the Bonn Conference in 2001, hoping to pave the way to a normalization of relations with America. As I was told by James Dobbins, who led the American delegation at the Bonn Conference, without Iran's support, the conference was unlikely to have succeeded. All of these efforts resulted only in Iran's inclusion as a member of the "axis of evil" in George W. Bush's State of the Union address just weeks later.

The Hostage Saga Concludes

If there were no plans in advance to take the American hostages, why did it require 444 days to have them released? This is a major question posed by many observers. Indeed, it was a complex set of developments that transpired after the embassy's takeover that prolonged the crisis.

Ebrahim Asgharzadeh offered this explanation:

Our plan was a student plan—temporary. But our activities at the embassy were met with support from, and subsequent imposition by

the Imam, who had no knowledge [of our plan] in advance. The case became one of national recognition ... people gathered around the embassy and we were under siege ... Following the second day, the case was out of our hands. People had even come from other cities to demonstrate in support of our actions. If we had left the embassy, it would be [perceived as a] betrayal to the people”³⁴

In other words, within the span of two days the episode grew way beyond a simple protest. National support appeared so strong that nobody, including the revolution’s leader, could make a quick decision about releasing the Americans. As days passed, the espionage documents were presented in dramatic fashion by the students in order to justify their own act of taking control of “the den of spies,” and the crisis became even more complicated. To Iran, America’s conspiracy against the revolution was no longer a matter of rumor or conjecture.

Eight days after the takeover, President Carter issued an executive order to freeze Iran’s assets in the US and imposed the first round of sanctions, including a ban on oil imports from Iran. The Chase Manhattan bank, among others, froze Iran’s assets. Whether it was a conspiracy theory or a reality, Iranians concluded that the American president was being manipulated and controlled by big business. This concerned Iran’s top ranking decision-makers. They thought that a weak and vulnerable president might do whatever he considered necessary to overthrow the Islamic state in the interest of big oil companies who had lost their influence in Iran, thereby increasing mistrust between Iran and the US. But more importantly, the issue of frozen assets and the Americans’ subsequent claims against the new Iranian government took on new life. It complicated the crisis by tethering it to a multi-billion-dollar dispute.

Following the resignation of Iran’s provisional government, two more factors negatively affected the crisis. First, there was no mediator to bridge the gap and moderate the conflict between Iran’s revolutionary leadership and the United States. And second, with the exit of the moderate Bazargan administration, radicalism and anti-Americanism became dominated.

As direct and indirect negotiations were ongoing, Iran asked, as one of the conditions for releasing the hostages, that the US admit guilt and apologize for its past policies. Carter was fiercely opposed to that. In the meantime, the crisis escalated and became a symbol of pride for Iranians in opposition to “Americans who had supported the Shah and had ignored the Iranian population.” It became increasingly difficult for

Iran's leaders to agree to the release of US hostages against the backdrop of the ever-growing damage to Iran resulting from the freezing of its assets.

In February 1980, three months after the initial incident, Ayatollah Khomeini, now hospitalized due to heart-related problems, passed responsibility for deciding the American hostages' fate to the future parliament (*Majlis*). There has long been speculation that in so doing, Ayatollah Khomeini intended to ensure that the only remaining branch of the *nezam*, the *Majlis*, was established before the hostages were released. Two months later, only a few weeks away from the first parliamentary elections, Iranians were stunned by Operation Eagle Claw, ordered by President Jimmy Carter in attempt to rescue the hostages. The operation failed and eight Americans were killed, cultivating even more hostility in Iran.

The initial meeting of the parliament took place at the end of May. The Shah had by that stage left the US for Egypt, but the delay had done its damage. "If the US had chosen to ask the Shah to leave sooner and before taking harsh actions such as freezing Iran's assets and imposing sanctions the crisis would have been definitely over," said Ebrahim Asgharzadeh. "Our main problem was the Shah but the US closed its eyes on that solution and instead chose coercive solutions," he added.³⁵

Throughout most of June, the *Majlis* was busy organizing itself. Since this was the first parliament of the Islamic Republic, none of its representatives had relevant experience. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was elected chairman of the parliament, was eager to conclude the hostage issue, but he faced resistance within parliament. A section of representatives would leave the chamber as soon as a debate about the hostages began, thus preventing the parliament from making decisions aimed at ending the crisis. A two-thirds quorum of representatives was required to vote for a bill.

The Shah died in July 1980. It was now apparent to many in the Iranian government that President Carter's action in admitting the Shah to the US had been motivated by humanitarian concern for an ill man. But by this stage, the matter had become much more complicated, especially as a result of freezing Iran's assets by President Carter and claims against those assets.

While the *Majlis* moved slowly on the hostage issue, Sadeq Tabatabai, brother-in-law of Ahmad Khomeini, and with the permission of the revolution's leader, volunteered to contact the Americans through the German government in an attempt to resolve the issue. Ayatollah

Khomeini had four conditions for any settlement: the US to return the Shah's wealth to Iran; the cancellation of all US claims against Iran; a guarantee of no future US military or political intervention in Iran; and the unfreezing of all Iranian funds by the US.

Tabatabai met with Warren Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State, in Bonn in mid-September 1980. During a lengthy meeting, Tabatabai presented Ayatollah Khomeini's demands. Christopher said that the demand about non-intervention was acceptable. Regarding the unfreezing of Iranian assets, Christopher maintained that there were outstanding claims against Iran which were in the legal process and the US administration could not intervene with them. He did say that approximately \$5.5 billion could be released immediately after the hostages were freed. With regard to voiding all legal claims against Iran, Christopher declared that this would not be possible, but that the US would accept international arbitration to bring all existing lawsuits to a mutual settlement.

With regard to returning the Shah's wealth, there existed two problems. First, Christopher maintained that the Shah could not have had a huge amount of money in the US. Iran's claim that billions of dollars existed was a fantasy. Second, even if the Shah had that kind of money, US law would not allow the government to confiscate assets without a court ruling. He pronounced that the US could only facilitate suits by the Iranian government to make its claims in the US courts.

Tabatabai was scheduled to return to Iran on September 22 and report to Ayatollah Khomeini about the progress of his talks. While he was at the airport, he realized that the flight was delayed and no explanation seemed to be forthcoming as to why. He was finally told that they could not fly to Tehran because Iraq had bombed Mehrabad Airport. Thus began the eight-year Iran-Iraq War.

Iran perceived from the onset of the war that Saddam Hussein would not have commenced the conflict without US support, and anti-American sentiment inevitably intensified. Carter wrote later that "Typically the Iranians accused me of planning and supporting the invasion."³⁶ The factor of mistrust was activated again. "Death to Carter" chants were now heard from inside the compound of the American Embassy to Iran's *Majlis*. Meanwhile, Iraq's invasion took precedence over the hostages' issue.

In early October, Tabatabai returned to Bonn with hope of closing the hostages' issue if the US would agree to the supply of military hardware and spare aircraft parts. What he got was a proposal covering \$150 million worth of material for which the Shah's regime had previously

paid. Tabatabai returned to Tehran to consult with Iran's leadership. While the Americans waited in anticipation to hear from Tabatabai, the *Majlis* and the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Rajaei assumed responsibility for the matter. Tabatabai suddenly disappeared from the scene.

On November 2, Iran's *Majlis* finally passed a resolution to free the hostages based on the four conditions that Ayatollah Khomeini had listed in September, but it was too late to save Carter's presidency. "If the hostages were released," Carter wrote, "I was convinced my reelection would be assured; if the expectations of the American people were dashed again, there was little chance I could win."³⁷ Two days later, Ronald Reagan defeated Carter in a landslide victory.

Gary Sick, my friend and an Iran expert who served on the US National Security Council, wrote a book called *October Surprise*, in which he accused Reagan allies Bill Casey, who would later become the CIA Director during Reagan's presidency, and George H. W. Bush, Reagan's running mate in the election, of holding secret negotiations in Europe with Iranian officials. He claimed that they struck a deal with Iranian officials and interlocutors not to release the hostages before the US presidential election. I have no first-hand knowledge about those dealings.

In any event, on November 3, the Americans were informed that Iran had asked Algeria to serve as a mediator in the hostage negotiations. In fact, this was Rajaei's administration's initiative to take control of the hostages' affair rather than leave it to an unofficial channel, namely Sadeq Tabatabai. For the next two and a half months, the Iranians worked with the Algerians and the Carter administration, headed by Warren Christopher, regarding the details of a deal between Iran and the US. On several occasions the negotiations almost collapsed, and between November 3, 1980 and January 19, 1981, when the final agreement was signed under the Algiers Accords³⁸ (or Declaration of Algiers), numerous proposals and counter-proposals were exchanged.

Iran's stance was suddenly and significantly softened on January 16, three days before Reagan's inauguration. Iranians wanted to finalize the deal, as Christopher convincingly argues, with "the devil that they knew," that is, the Carter administration, and then concentrate on the war with Iraq and obtain the military hardware that they desperately needed for that purpose. The hostages were freed minutes after President Reagan's inauguration ceremony.

Any supposition that Iran made little or no effort to resolve

the 444-day ordeal would be far from the truth. While there were clearly political forces inside Iran that sabotaged progress towards a resolution of the crisis, to claim that the hostage crisis was simply about the rooting out of one Iranian political faction by another, *rather than* reflecting the deep-rooted hostility towards and mistrust of the American government, would be a misjudgment. The aforementioned developments clearly illustrate that over time, the crisis became increasingly complicated by a chain of actions by the US. These actions, such as the freezing of Iranian assets and the imposition of sanctions, not only intensified hostility in Tehran but also created new, sometimes massive, obstacles which took on a life independent of the issue of the hostages.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that the hostage-taking had a negative impact on American society and politics. The US believed that taking hostages was an outrageous violation of international law, violating the sanctity of diplomatic immunity and protection of embassy compounds.

Even though the American hostage crisis led to a complete breakdown in Iran–US diplomatic ties, it also provided the first opportunity for both nations to conduct meaningful discussions and hammer out their differences and disputes through bilateral negotiations brokered by Algeria. The Algiers Accords in this respect were a landmark event. While it focused primarily on the US Embassy hostage crisis, it also addressed concerns of the Iranians and led to a mutually acceptable resolution to the crisis. The agreement provided for the immediate release of the hostages by Iran, while in return “The United States pledges that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran’s internal affairs.”

Other provisions of the Algiers Accords were mainly concerned with matters of finance.³⁹ The US now partially revoked sanctions against Iran and began the process of returning billions of dollars’ worth of frozen assets to Iran. The Iran–United States Claims Tribunal, located in The Hague, was created in an effort to determine the claims of United States nationals against Iran and of Iranian nationals against the United States. Iran could also now put forward claims in the American courts against the Shah’s assets.

The US commitment to the Algiers Accords was relatively short-lived. According to reports, it was not long before President Reagan and CIA Director William Casey began funding operations aimed at undermining the Iranian government, involving various exiled groups,

including the Shah's former naval commander, separatist organizations, and the son of the Shah.⁴⁰ This interference in the domestic affairs of Iran was a blatant violation of the Algiers Accords. Instead of laying the foundation for new relations based on the Accords, the US never really reversed its course of cutting relations with Tehran. America's support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran essentially killed the Algiers Accords. The legacy of that agreement between the two countries might have been a future relationship based on mutual respect, cooperation, and non-interference. Instead, the failure of the US to follow through on its commitments and the counterproductive policy it adopted once again took animosity and mistrust to new levels.

Chapter 3

THE DECADE OF WAR AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE REVOLUTION 1980-9

Joining the Revolution

I was born in 1957 into an affluent, religious family in Kashan, a city 220 kilometers south of the capital, Tehran. Kashan is internationally known for its rugs with unique shades in dazzling designs of artistic brilliance. My father was a major producer and trader of carpet. After completing high school in 1975, my mother insisted that I should study in the US. So, after a few months dedicated to learning English, I went to Sacramento, California, for my undergraduate studies at Sacramento City College and Sacramento State University. I began a four-year undergraduate degree program in engineering.

Due to my religious background, I got involved with the Muslim Students Association (MSA) of Europe and America. Shortly thereafter, I assumed a leading role in the MSA, Sacramento State University branch. Many Iranian students who were members of the MSA would later assume decisive roles in the post-revolution Iranian government. Mohammad Hashemi Rafsanjani (members of the MSA would call him father), the younger brother of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most influential figures in the Islamic Republic, and some ministers of Rouhani's cabinet, such as Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Minister of Communication Mahmoud Vaezi, were among the leading figures of the Iranian Muslim students.

During my last year of undergraduate studies at Sacramento State University, Iran was gripped by a revolutionary spirit. Millions poured onto the streets, demonstrations turned bloody, workers went on strike, and state buildings were vandalized and burned. Like many other revolutionaries, as a young man of only 20 years, my understanding of politics was very limited. I had no idea about revolution and the consequences of a regime change. I did not know whether I should continue my studies or join the millions of people inside Iran who struggled for

the victory of the revolution. In October 1978, following restrictions placed on his political and religious activities by the Iraqi government, Ayatollah Khomeini, the religious and political leader of the revolution, left Iraq for Paris. In France he chose to reside in a village outside Paris called Neauphle-le-Château.

In order to resolve my dilemma of whether to stay in the US or go back to Iran, one day I called Ayatollah Khomeini's residence in France. I introduced myself to Ayatollah Khomeini's secretary and asked, "What is my duty? Should I stay and continue my studies, or return to Iran and serve the revolution?" The secretary told me he would talk to Imam (Khomeini) and I could call back the next day to obtain his answer. "If you are convinced that you can help the revolution effectively, you should come back. Otherwise you may stay and continue your studies," he told me when I called back the next day. I informed the MSA of this verdict, and deliberated over it for two days. I finally concluded that I would be able to assist the revolution. Without informing my parents, I returned to Iran, leaving my university program unfinished. I could wait no longer to join the revolution.

The first day after my arrival, and for a few days after that, I took to the streets and joined the demonstrators. Then one day I asked myself, "Am I playing an effective role in the revolution?" The answer was decidedly, "No." But it appeared to me that 99 percent of the people who chanted "Death to Shah, Death to America" were as confused and ignorant as me about the revolution's direction, unsure of what was supposed to happen next. Within a few days, the Shah left the country and he nominated Shahpour Bakhtiar, a politician of liberal persuasion who had previously opposed the Shah, as the prime minister. While daily demonstrations continued across the country, I left Tehran for my home town of Kashan. My parents were shocked to see me back, having left my school in the US for such a dangerous situation at home. My younger brother, Abbas, introduced me to members of a militant group who were prepared to fight against the Shah's regime. They took me to the deserts around Kashan for a three-day training program. However, within ten days of the Shah leaving Iran, his military apparatus, the most powerful in the region, collapsed in the face of millions of unarmed revolutionaries, and the revolution stunningly succeeded with no need for a guerrilla war.

A few months after the victory of the revolution, the Islamic Republic Party was formed by five Ayatollahs: Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti, Mohammad Javad Bahonar, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Khamenei, and Abdolkarim Mousavi-Ardabili, all students of Ayatollah Khomeini before his exile from the country in 1964. The goal

of the party's founders was to mobilize popular support for the Islamic Republic which they thought was in an unstable condition, threatened by armed and unarmed opposition groups inside the country, as well as by foreign powers.

The party was led by Ayatollah Dr. Beheshti, one of the main architects of the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution and the head of Iran's judiciary in the early 1980s. He was arguably the second most powerful and influential man in Iran, after Ayatollah Khomeini. In my meeting with him one month after the victory of the revolution, he told me that the new Iran should have multiple political parties in order to establish a real democracy.

During my next meeting with him in Kashan, in March 1981, he appointed me as editor-in-chief of the leading English daily, the *Tehran Times*. He indicated in our discussions that if he had known about the seizure of the American Embassy in advance, he would have halted the plans before it ever happened. "That was not in our hand, but to rebuild healthy relations with the US based on non-interference and mutual respect *is* in our hand. We should do our utmost to get there." At the end of the meeting, he asked me to meet with him after another three months to present a report about the *Tehran Times*.

Due to his influence, Dr. Beheshti was undoubtedly the political figure most targeted by opposition groups, primarily by communist groups and the People's Mujahedin of Iran or the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), inside and outside of Iran. They intended to discredit him and by association the system. Nevertheless, he was extremely patient and considered the actions of his opponents as the inevitable outcome of the freedom that had suddenly emerged in the aftermath of the revolution. He said that political groups who had been silenced and oppressed during the Shah's regime needed a way to express their accumulated grievances.

The MEK was founded in 1965 by a group of university students with a hybrid ideology comprised of Islam and Marxism, and devoted to armed struggle against the Shah. After the victory of the revolution and the death of the original leaders at the hands of the Shah's security apparatus, the new leaders who were freed from prison demanded a share in power.

After the MEK's decisive loss in the first parliamentary elections in May 1980, and once it became clear that they had failed to secure a position in the new system's political structure, their manner became increasingly belligerent toward the government. They primarily targeted leaders of the Islamic Republic Party which had won that election by a landslide.

Tensions between the MEK and the Islamic Republic Party intensified after the then president of Iran, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, was impeached. The MEK cast its support behind Bani Sadr and later, in June 1981, they declared commitment to a military phase and armed struggle against the standing government.

On the evening of June 28, 1981, a day prior to my scheduled meeting with Beheshti in Tehran, my wife called, crying hysterically, and implored me to come home immediately as there had been a major bomb blast nearby. I got to my father-in-law's home, which was attached to the headquarters building of the Islamic Republic Party, as quickly as possible. Two large bombs had exploded inside the conference hall of the same building where Beheshti had been addressing dozens of high-ranking members of the party. The scene inside was carnage.

I joined hundreds of citizens and rescue teams to search amongst the rubble for survivors until the early hours of the morning. After removing the bodies of the dead and trying to save those still alive, details of the victims began to emerge. Dr. Beheshti, four cabinet ministers, 24 members of the parliament, and 43 others, including several government officials, had been assassinated.

In an interview years later, Saeed Shahsavandi, a former member of the MEK's central staff, gave details of the terrorist attack.¹ According to Shahsavandi, the person who carried out the attack was called Mohammad Reza Kolahi. He was a first-year electrical engineering student at the University of Science and Technology. He had infiltrated the party and secured a job as the organizer of the party's meetings and conferences.

That evening, Kolahi's unfettered access to the conference hall enabled him to plant two bombs: one under the podium and one underneath a column. A few minutes before the explosion, he left the conference hall. At approximately 9.00 in the evening, Dr. Beheshti started his opening remarks and the two bombs detonated, one after the other. Due to the magnitude of this explosion, the conference hall's roof collapsed onto the participants, the cause of death for nearly all of the victims. According to Shahsavandi, within a span of six months, ten thousand people who worked for the government or who had supported the Iranian government were killed by the MEK.²

The bombing at the Islamic Republic Party's headquarters changed the political climate in Iran. Parties were first restricted, and then they were gradually banned altogether. Plain-clothes radical groups made life difficult for any opposition to raise its voice. By this time, we were almost a full year into the Iran-Iraq War. Some maintain that

the government took the bombing and the war as a pretext to silence any opposition that would challenge its authority. The government, however, reasoned that it could not allow everyday street protests and a state of chaos while it was fighting to liberate the lands that Iraq had captured. The province of Khuzestan, at the heart of Iran's oil resources, and part of the western provinces had been captured by the Iraqi army.

Dr. Beheshti, despite the image that the opposition groups would present of him as a dictator and a monopolist, wholeheartedly advocated freedom of opinion and expression. He advocated and participated in televised debates with Marxist theorists. His absence was a blow to moderate thinking in Iran and changed the balance in favor of the radicalism. Shamsavandi says that after the bombing, the MEK eavesdropped on the police and revolutionary committees only to make sure that Beheshti was dead.³

A few weeks later, in July 1981, I was returning from my work at the *Tehran Times*. It was around 9.00 p.m. when I mounted my motorcycle and began my journey home. I soon realized that another motorcycle was tailing me so I attempted to lose them by taking side streets, but to no avail. As I accelerated, so did they, and it was clear that they were after me. I remember maneuvering at high speeds through narrow streets, taking every step I could to reach safety. I finally turned down my father-in-law's street in a last-ditch effort to save my life. As I sped towards the house, remarkably the gates to the yard were open. I rode my bike straight through them as the motorists behind me fired shots in my direction. The bullets barely missed and I escaped without harm. If the door to the house had been closed, the time it would have taken me to open it would have cost me my life. This was the reality we faced in the aftermath of the revolution: countless terrorist acts by the MEK aimed to dismantle and disrupt every aspect of life in society.

Another major terror attack occurred two months after the Islamic Republic Party's headquarters bombing, on August 30, 1981. A MEK operative, Massoud Kashmiri, had infiltrated the central command of the Islamic leadership and placed a bomb underneath the table at the cabinet meeting in the office of newly elected President Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad-Javad Bahonar.

I was in my office at the *Tehran Times*, approximately two miles from the office of the president, when the explosion occurred. It was so loud that it shook our building. I could see smoke rising from the government building and I raced to the scene. When I arrived, ambulances and a large crowd had already gathered. As the editor-in-chief of the *Tehran Times*, I was given access to the government

building. There, I saw the burned bodies of both Rajai and Bahonar brought from the rubble.

Over the next ten years, while working for the *Tehran Times*, I also served in other positions. Between 1981 and 1983, I worked as the Vice President of the Islamic Propagation Organization. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati was the president of the organization.⁴ In 1983, I offered to set up the parliament's administration organization for Rafsanjani, who was then the speaker of the parliament (*Majlis*), and was subsequently appointed head of the organization.

In 1985, while I served in the administrative position in parliament, a Samsonite briefcase was left at the front door of my home. On arriving home, I was suspicious of what might be inside it. Without approaching, I called the police station, which was two blocks from my home. The police arrived immediately and removed the briefcase to their station to investigate it further. They deactivated the bomb which was placed inside the briefcase. I was told that it would have detonated upon my opening it. I had once again eluded assassination.

After the police took the briefcase, they permitted me to enter my house. Immediately after I walked in, the telephone rang and when I answered, there was an unknown person who addressed me by my first and last name, but I did not recognize the voice. A few seconds later, a third person interjected on the line. This interruption was by the Iranian Intelligence Ministry, who informed me, while the first voice continued speaking, that "On the other side of the line is a MEK terrorist from camp Ashraf in Iraq and you should hang up the phone immediately." The MEK was following up to see whether I was alive or dead. I hung up the phone. The phone rang again. I picked it up and it was the Intelligence Ministry once again. They told me, "Mr. Mousavian, we have credible evidence that you are on the hit list of the MEK and we implore you to relocate to an unknown location for a while." At the time, my wife and I had three young daughters, and to ensure everyone's safety we moved to a small apartment on Tehran's periphery and resided there for three months. In 1986, radical leftists (religious not communist) secured a majority in the *Majlis*. During several discussions with Rafsanjani, I informed him that due to differences in views between the radical leftist and myself, I could no longer serve as head of the parliament's administration. In this period, the radical leftists held an anti-West/American position, were opposed to the free market economy, and supported the hostage-taking move. In response to my request, Rafsanjani introduced me to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, after which I started my

political and diplomatic career as the Director General of the West Europe Department of the ministry.

During my career, “terrorism” remained one of the issues at the core of the conflict between Iran and the US and the West. Following its deadly terrorist attacks within Iran, the MEK moved its headquarters to Iraq in 1986 and allied itself with Saddam Hussein against Iran in the war—the MEK was financially and militarily backed by the Iraqi dictator until his fall in 2003.⁵ The group was used by Saddam to provide intelligence and to fight against Iran. They also assisted Saddam in the bloody crackdown on the Iraqi Shia and Kurdish populations.⁶

During the reign of the Shah, the MEK was responsible for attacks that killed US civilians and military personnel in Iran. Finally, on October 8, 1997, the US State Department added the MEK to its Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list.⁷

Since 2010, four nuclear scientists have been assassinated in Iran. A February 2012 NBC News report claimed that, according to US officials, the deadly attacks were carried out by the MEK which had been “trained and armed by Israel’s secret service.”⁸ The report also suggested that the statements by US officials confirmed the same “charges leveled by Iran’s leaders.”

Under these circumstances, in September 2012, the United States removed the MEK from the US Foreign Terrorist Organization list. This move involved the flow of millions of dollars to members of Congress, Washington lobby groups, and former top US officials.⁹ What is amazing is that while the MEK was on the terrorist list, US officials received funds to support the group. It was reported that an investigation was under way by the US Treasury Department to determine whether some of the funds were provided in breach of the law relating to “material support for a terrorist group.”¹⁰ In cases involving links to other banned organizations, “such as Hamas and Hezbollah, individuals have received long jail sentences for indirect financial support.”¹¹

According to some reports the list of the officials who received funds is a long one, but prominent among them is Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chair of the House Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa.¹² Interestingly, after a June 2013 hearing before the subcommittee, Ros-Lehtinen was asked if she was convinced by the experts’ advice, who almost unanimously agreed that the US should give the new Iranian president, Hassan Rowhani, time to change the direction of Iran’s foreign policy. She replied, “Not at all. We need to continue our sanctions policy and help our allies to see the light that a nuclear Iran will destroy the United States and will destroy Israel.”¹³

It is disheartening that members of the Congress should support imposing more sanctions on Iran because this position reaps a payoff by satisfying lobby groups.¹⁴ There is now a rock-solid perception in Tehran that the US Congress is heavily influenced by lobby groups and that that personal interests of its legislators significantly impact, if not determine, its foreign policy. These lobby groups, like the MEK's, are not satisfied with less than regime change, and the MEK is viewed by part of the US policy community as a viable instrument to achieve it. Congressman Ted Poe, who received thousands of dollars from the head of a pro-MEK organization, described the group as the "ticket for regime change in Iran."¹⁵

The problems between Iran and the US, as discussed earlier, primarily arise from deep mistrust. Removing the MEK from the terrorist organizations list could be detrimental to the efforts of many people like me who try to build bridges between the two governments. In my conversation with a high-ranking Iranian official, I was informed that "the move strengthened the position of Iran's government, saying that the United States' policy toward Iran is based on regime change at all cost—including support for terrorist organizations that do Washington's bidding in its effort."

Shortly before Iran's June 2013 presidential election, chess grand master and human rights activist Garry Kasparov launched a "virtual election" under the banner, "We Choose," to provide a free and fair vote in Iran. News of his initiative gained widespread coverage in the West. According to We Choose, "The final results ... show that Iranian reformist candidates are the big winners of this global initiative."¹⁶ Reformist candidates received 67 percent of the votes cast.

More interesting is the number of votes for Mrs. Maryam Rajavi who officially heads the MEK. It was logically assumed that the MEK would mobilize its supporters to actively participate in the voting, yet Rajavi received only 0.9 percent of the total votes.¹⁷ This raises the question as to how a considerable number of American officials concluded that the MEK had enough popular support to actualize regime change in Iran and how it could be an alternative to the current Iranian system.

The continued misanalysis of Iran's politics and society by American officials only heightens mistrust and hostilities, further complicating the relationship between Iran and the US and providing no concrete benefit for the American government.

Iraq Attacks Iran

On September 22, 1980, Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, shocked Iran by starting an all-out war against them, the results of which were devastating. This war would rage for eight bloody years, costing the lives of a million people on both sides and hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of damages. That doesn't even include years of adverse effects on socio-economic development in both countries.

There have been multiple reasons suggested for Saddam's action. Some argue that Iran's "export of revolution" language was seen as a major threat to Saddam's rule, particularly because the majority of Iraqis, that is, the Shias, had a religious affinity with the new leadership in Iran, as it was the first Islamic republic to be based on Shia ideology. Proponents of this argument maintain that Saddam's desire was to stifle the threat and block the expansion of an Islamic government into Iraq. This factor may indeed have played a role in Saddam's decision to invade.

However, this argument ignores historical realities and Saddam's personal, endless greed for power and domination. If Saddam's attack on Iran was due to the Iranians' "export of revolution" mantra and the sense of being threatened by the aggressive revolutionary language of the Iranian government, then how does one make sense of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a Sunni Arab country, only two years after the end of Iran-Iraq War? Besides, during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, Kuwait unwaveringly *supported* Iraq, pumping billions of dollars into Saddam Hussein's war machine.

History illustrates that Saddam Hussein's ambitions and his desire for expansion dated back to the Shah's era. However, the Shah's military power far surpassed other Persian Gulf nations, thanks to a sudden increase in Iran's petrodollars due to rocketing oil prices in 1973 when the Arab OPEC countries embargoed their oil exports in response to the Arab-Israeli war. In this context, Saddam had no choice but to sign the 1975 Algiers agreement which settled Iraq's existing border disputes with Iran. In doing so, he gave up Iraq's claim to the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan, while the Shatt-al-Arab waterway (called *Arvand Rood* in Iran) remained under the equal control of the two states. After the revolution, Iran adhered firmly to the 1975 treaty.

Iraqi provocations dated back to April and May 1979, almost a year and a half before the all-out invasion of Iran. In May 1979, Iraq bombarded the town of Mehran and some other Iranian border villages. This was only three months after the victory of the revolution

and one month after the Islamic Republic's formation. The Iranian Foreign Ministry protested and the Iraqi government said in response that the 1975 treaty had been imposed on Iraq under duress.¹⁸ The reality was that Saddam sought to destroy the only power in the Persian Gulf that stood in the way of his regional domination.

In 1980, Iran was preoccupied with the hostage crisis and its deep hostility toward the United States. Additionally, they were entangled in a post-revolution upheaval. With their army all but disintegrated, Saddam was conscious of Iran's significantly weakened defense position. He therefore seized this opportunity in the hope of annexing the oil-rich province of Khuzestan and crushing Iran as a regional rival for all time.

In a televised broadcast, Saddam tore up a copy of the 1975 treaty, after which he proclaimed formal abrogation of the Algiers Treaty on September 17, 1980. The Iraqi army immediately invaded Iran, and its principal target was the province of Khuzestan.

Iraq attacked Iran on such a large scale that from the onset, Iranians viewed the invasion as complementary to the United States' aim of overthrowing the regime and the disintegration of Iran. It was incomprehensible to Iran's leadership that Saddam would dare launch such an endeavor without America's green light. The evidence and events that followed would confirm this suspicion.

Although in his memoirs, Jimmy Carter denies that the US gave a "green light" to Saddam, a confidential "talking points" memo written by Alexander Haig, Reagan's first Secretary of State, claimed otherwise. Investigative reporter Robert Perry revealed that in this memo Haig referred to a meeting with the Saudi Prince Fahd in April 1981 in which he learned that, "President Carter gave the Iraqis a green light to launch the war against Iran through Fahd."¹⁹ Others, however, discount Haig's story as a fabrication.

In any case, Iran's assessment was based on what they saw, not any knowledge of secret talks. To them, the fact that the US government did not condemn Iraq's invasion, recognize it as a breach of international law and an act of aggression, nor call for the evacuation of Iraqi troops from occupied lands in Iran was clear proof that the Americans backed Iraq's invasion.

In February 1982, the United States removed Saddam's regime from the State Department's Sponsors of Terrorism list. This move facilitated Iraq's entry into the international arms market and purchase of arms from the US, a fact that did not go unnoticed in Iran. In two operations, during March and May of 1982, to the

surprise of numerous observers and American policy-makers alike, Iranians engaged in a series of bloody battles, breaking the Iraqi line and separating its units in northern and southern Khuzestan. Iran finally regained the strategic city of Khorramshahr in Khuzestan. From this point, Iran decided to push into Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein.

In the wake of these developments, the US suddenly decided to break its silence on the war. In a formal statement, White House Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes confirmed American "opposition to the seizure of any territory by force."²⁰ This statement did not come as a surprise to Iran's leaders. Not a single high-ranking Iranian official missed that fact that when the Iraqi military seized three of Iran's provinces, the US government said nothing. But when Iran went on the offensive, US leaders were outraged. Iran's leaders were under no illusions about America's real intentions despite their officially neutral position.

What motivated the Reagan administration to take such a stance and support the Iraqi invasion is debatable. The hostage crisis, as many commentators maintain, might have played a role. As a result of the humiliation that Americans suffered during 444 days of the hostage crisis, the Iranian government was viewed as an irrational, uncompromising, and cruel entity. In their eyes, Saddam Hussein was the lesser of two evils.

Another reason could have been that Americans perceived revolutionary Iran as a threat to their interests and wanted to prevent Iran gaining control of arguably the richest region in oil reserves in the world. The Director of the National Intelligence Council wrote that "an Iranian defeat of Iraq would set into motion forces for accommodation with anti-Western goals—whether by overthrow of existing regimes or accommodation by them."²¹

On the other hand, it is remarkable that top US policy-makers did not see Saddam as an imminent threat to the region's oil countries, with his ambitions of gaining supremacy in the region. His attack and seizure of Kuwait in 1990 illustrated that the Americans had miscalculated by investing in Saddam's regime.

The Reagan administration lacked unbiased advisors who were familiar with Iranian politics and culture. Additionally, policy-makers were trapped in a Cold War mentality. Both of these facts caused the US failure to grasp two important realities. First, all that the new Iranian government and its grassroots supporters demanded from the US was recognition of their identity and a non-interventionist

non-patron–client relationship. Slogans like “export of revolution,” in essence were about establishing an identity which the West had refused to recognize since the Shah’s era. It was about establishing a different culture and urging the West to accept it. Second, after a revolution on such large scale, it was impossible for a standard army to defeat the highly motivated, religious, nationalist, revolutionary youth who were ready to give up their lives for their cause. They would undoubtedly defend the revolution and their country’s sovereignty and independence. This sentiment was shared by Iranians from all walks of life. For example, conventional wisdom dictates that wealthy people seldom risk their lives by going to the front lines and fighting for their beliefs. My brother, however, who came from an affluent family, was among many young Iranians who volunteered, fought, and was martyred, in November 1983. He lost his life in the front lines on the edge of Kermanshah, western Iran, and his funeral was held without his body.

Concurrent with Iraq’s invasion of Iran, Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, deploying a force of 76,000 troops, 800 tanks, 1,500 armored personnel carriers, and 634 airplanes, leading to the deaths of an estimated 17,825 Lebanese soldiers, 9,797 Syrian and PLO fighters, and 675 Israelis. Between September 16 and 18, 1982, the Israeli Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon, allowed Christian Phalangist militiamen to massacre over 800 Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.²² The 1982 invasion of Lebanon had far-reaching security implications including consequences for the US in its support of the two aggressors: Israel and Iraq.

The car bombing in Beirut in October 1983 which killed 241 American servicemen made the Americans more hostile towards Iran. American intervention in Lebanon’s civil wars in favor of the Christian dominated Lebanese army against the Muslim community clearly contradicted its claim to be neutral in the conflict. Colonel Timothy J. Geraghty, the commander of the US Marines in Beirut at the time of the incident, wrote years later, “It is noteworthy that the United States provided direct naval gunfire support—which I strongly opposed—for a week to the Lebanese Army [who was fighting against Muslims] at a mountain village called Suq-al-Garb ... American support removed any lingering doubts of our neutrality.”²³

However, as stated, the bombing had a detrimental effect on America’s view of Iran. Americans linked the terrorist act to Hezbollah (although Hezbollah did not exist at the time, but some elements who later founded Hezbollah were seen as organizers of

the suicide attack) and, by association, to Iran, which supported and originally organized the Shia group. Iran denied the accusations.²⁴ Nevertheless, the bombing increased US hostility toward and mistrust of Iran.

The US and Iran are both victims of terrorism but the two countries accuse each other of supporting and/or organizing terrorist and militant groups to harm each other. Logically, the two countries, as victims of terrorism, should cooperate with each other to combat terrorism, rather than engage in finger pointing, name calling, and inciting hatred toward each other. The beneficiaries of this state of affairs are those who would wish to sabotage Iran–US relations inside Iran and the United States, as well as outside the two states—those who are inspired by personal, political, and ideological motivations to prevent normalization of relations between them.

While the perpetrator of the bombing in Beirut has not been identified with certainty, three issues about responsibility for terrorism should be noted, regardless. First, US policy-makers perceive that whatever actions are carried out by groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas are checked and coordinated with the Iranian government in advance. That is simply not the case. Second, the possible role of rogue or spy elements inside Iran, with respect to terrorist attacks, should not be ignored. Third, generally speaking, false flag terrorism, or terrorist activities that are organized by external actors, again aiming to provoke mistrust and bring Iran and the US to confrontation, must be considered as possibilities in considering who is responsible for terrorist attacks.

Around 1983, Iranian intelligence warned the country's leaders that the Americans were providing the Iraqis with satellite images that revealed Iran's deployment and the locations at which they were amassing troops to launch an attack on Iraqi forces. Declassified documents revealed later that Donald Rumsfeld, then Special Envoy for President Reagan, secretly visited Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, in Iraq in December 1983. The "talking points" of Rumsfeld's meeting included assurances to Aziz that the US "would regard any major reversal of Iraq's fortune as a strategic defeat for the west."²⁵

A few months later, in 1984, Tariq Aziz met with President Reagan at the White House. Following this meeting, the two sides agreed to restore diplomatic relations. A *New York Times* headline declared "U.S. restores full ties with Iraq but cites neutrality in Gulf War."²⁶ Secretary of State George Shultz later wrote in his memoirs that "While the

United States basically adhered to the policy of not supplying arms to either side, our support for Iraq increased in rough proportion to Iran's military success, plain and simple."²⁷

Even without the evidence that surfaced later, Iranian decision-makers were certain that the United States would help Saddam, either directly or indirectly through other Western and Arab countries in the region. Iran blamed Washington, as a supporter of Saddam, for inciting one of the most devastating wars in Iran's history. Hostility filled the minds and hearts of not only the elite but also grassroots supporters of the Islamic revolutionary government. After all, many of their youth lost their lives or were paralyzed or suffered permanent psychological damage, which was called *mowji* (related to wave), meaning they had lost their psychological balance as a result of waves of explosions on the battlefield.

These developments reaffirmed for Iranians that the Americans' strategic goal was regime change and if possible disintegration of Iran, and that any offer for reconciliation would be purely tactical. Iranian hardliners posited that Americans were Americans, and that there was no difference between hardliners and centrists. This mirrored the false notion of some American scholars and policy-makers who claimed that there was no moderate in Iran.

Needless to say, the obvious conflict between the formal US stance of neutrality in relation to the war, and its perceived support of Saddam, convinced many Iranian policy-makers of duplicity by the US government. As a result, mistrust of the United States escalated. But the most notable conclusion drawn from the Iran–Iraq War was that Iran could not rely on the friendship of *any* country. We have a saying in Farsi that translates as, "We should get powerful since, in the state of nature, the weak will be destroyed."

Mutual Hostility and Suspicion befalls Iran and its Arab Neighbors

The United States' grand strategy in the Middle East is driven primarily by two elements: the security of energy resources and the safety of sea-lanes for the steady flow of oil; and the security of Israel. Energy resources in the region have both security and economic significance for the US. The security of the oil supply has been seen as vital to the US national interest since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt (1933–45).

Some analysts argue that today, America's reliance on the Persian Gulf's oil is considerably reduced.²⁸ Further, they claim that having discovered oil shale around the world, including major deposits in the United States, the Persian Gulf's oil supply will soon become irrelevant^{29 30} as a driving force behind America's grand strategy in the Middle East. Therefore, they conclude that the region will lose its relevance to US foreign policy.

But this argument is flawed. Indeed, any instability in oil supplies from the Persian Gulf region affects oil prices throughout the world. Thus, it follows that the world's economy, including that of the US, is affected, regardless of where the US purchases or produces its oil.

Energy economist James Hamilton³¹ reviewed four different events that led to oil supply disruptions.³² In reverse chronological order, these were the 1990 First Gulf War, the 1980 Iran–Iraq War, the 1978 Iranian Revolution, and the 1973 OPEC embargo. He determined from his research that, “each of these events was ... followed by a recession in the United States.” Hamilton also deduced from his findings that, “at their peak disruptions, these events took out 4–7 percent of net world production and were associated with oil price increases of 25–70 percent.”³³

Another significant factor to consider is that of speculation in the oil markets. The oil markets are propelled by more than just supply and demand, which was not the case historically. Political economist Professor Robert B. Reich³⁴ stated that “Financial speculators historically accounted for about 30 percent of oil contracts, producers and end users for about 70 percent. But today [2012], speculators account for 64 percent of all contracts.”³⁵ Reich's analysis was that when there is an uncertain outlook for supply, speculation abounds, causing market prices to surge.

Furthermore, leaders in the US protect the interests of other capitalist nations that are strategically important to them, especially Japan and the EU. For example, about 87 percent of Japanese crude oil imports come from the Persian Gulf region. For the global capitalist system to thrive, no single power must be allowed to gain control of the Middle East region. The emergence of a dominant state in the Middle East could potentially disrupt oil supplies to the rest of the World.

To conclude, any instability in the Persian Gulf region increases the price of oil, and this dynamic will affect the US economy regardless of their source of oil, domestic or foreign. Considering this, any tension between Iran and its Arab neighbors can potentially destabilize the region, therefore running contrary to US national interests. Hence,

relations between Iran and its Persian Gulf neighbors will remain significant to the United States for the foreseeable future.

There is deep-rooted mistrust between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This mistrust dates back to the Arab Muslim invasion of Iran some 1,400 years ago, and has had lasting effects on a people who have a deep cultural memory.

Iran is the only non-Arab country in the Persian Gulf. Its language is Farsi, not Arabic, and it is not a member of the League of Arab States. However, Iran is rich in history, a history that is older and more varied than that of the GCC. Historically, Iran has been a key player in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, as it is today.

Bahrain, a small island country situated near the western shores of the Persian Gulf with a population of 1.2 million, used to be Iran's fourteenth province, with a seat in the Iranian parliament dating back to the early 1900s. In the early 1970s, the Shah of Iran agreed to the independence of Bahrain. In return, the British recognized the Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands and Abu Musa as a long-standing part of Iranian territory. The continued territorial dispute over these islands between Iran and UAE has laid the foundation of major conflict between Iran and the GCC. These islands are close to the Strait of Hormuz, a point of strategic significance in the region. The oil that flowed through the Strait in 2011 accounted for "roughly 35 percent of all seaborne traded oil, or almost 20 percent of oil traded worldwide."³⁶

Due to the Shah's military ambition to become the region's dominant power, relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf were strained. Later, during the Iraqi invasion of Iran, the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region gave their full support to the aggressor, as a result of which the relationship between Iran and its neighbors entered one of its most tumultuous phases.

At the heart of dissension between Arab governments in the region and the newly established Islamic Republic was the so-called "export of revolution" slogan that Iran adopted shortly after the revolution.³⁷ The emergence of this mistrust pushed Iran's Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia and five smaller states, to form the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. A year later, the GCC established a joint military force called the "Peninsula Shield Force" (PSF). The PSF was originally supposed to be deployed in case a member state was threatened by a foreign power. However, Iran believed that the PSF was formed primarily to confront it.

The GCC had serious concerns about the religious and revolutionary nature of Iran's structure of governance and the dynamics of its political system. Meanwhile, a centuries-old rift between the Shia and Sunni populations continued to play its role in creating hostile relations. Ultra-orthodox religious scholars and elements on both sides never ceased to fan the flames of controversy. The largest Saudi oil fields are in the Eastern Province, home to most of the Saudi Shia population who possess the potential to threaten the Saudi kingdom and had a prior history of sporadic episodes of unrest. The Shia population comprises 10–15 percent of Saudi nationals. Bahrain, another GCC member that also happens to host the US Navy's 5th Fleet, has a population with a Shia majority that has challenged that country's establishment on many occasions.

Iran is influential in the Muslim world and in Arab nations such as Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Palestine. This Iranian popularity is generally attributed to its unrelenting support for the Palestinian cause, providing vital political, social, and economic backing for resistance movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. This is yet another point of concern for the GCC leaders, because support in other countries has the potential to disrupt the balance of power in favor of Iran. The reasoning is that this popularity could inspire revolution in the GCC member states. These factors resulted in the GCC's full support for Saddam during the Iran–Iraq War. Suspicions and mistrust were exacerbated by an attempted coup in Bahrain in 1981, which many believed Iran was behind.

Another serious point of contention were the annual demonstrations by Iranians against Israel and the United States during the *hajj* pilgrimage. The Saudi government viewed these demonstrations as incitement of Muslims and Saudi Arabia's Shia minority against its superpower ally, the United States. After 1982, when the tables turned and Iran went on the offensive against Iraq, Arabs were decidedly frightened and relations went from bad to worse. While astronomical amounts of money went from the GCC to Iraq in support of Saddam, the war of words and name calling between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached its peak.

Another major element of Iran's conflict with the GCC was the latter's strategic alliance with Western powers, specifically the US. Iran fiercely opposed a US presence in the region, while members of the GCC hosted the American military and their bases. Iran viewed American domination of the GCC countries as a humiliation to Muslims. Obviously, the GCC leaders viewed Iran's opposition as interference in the affairs of their countries.

From Iran's perspective, the security and stability of the Persian Gulf has been determined by Western powers for over a century, with no major part played by regional countries. Iran has always emphasized that countries in the Persian Gulf must assume a more prominent role in their own and the region's security and stability. This view contrasts sharply with that of the GCC members, who seek to preserve security and stability through political, military, and security alliances with the US and other Western powers. Iran maintains that during much of the past half-century, Western powers have blocked the independence of Muslim countries by supporting traditional systems of governance in the region and preventing development in the Persian Gulf.

Iraq's invasion of Iran and its use of chemical weapons cost Iran hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives. The GCC chose to ignore Saddam's criminal use of chemical weapons. According to the Iraq Survey Group's Final Report, Iraq received \$40 billion of financial support from the GCC during the war against Iran.³⁸ When Saddam proclaimed Khuzestan Province to be part of Iraq's territory and called it *Arabistan*, the GCC supported the move, leading Iranians to conclude that the GCC sought the complete disintegration of Iran. Then in the 1987 clashes between the Iranian pilgrims who demonstrated against the US and Israel and the Saudi security forces and police, 403 people, among them 275 Iranians, were killed and 2,000 more were injured.³⁹ There had never before been such intense hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War, followed by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, its staunch supporter during his war against Iran, coincided with the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani's efforts focused on the normalization of relations between Iran and the West as well as with its Arab neighbors.

Iran-Contra Scandal

During the summer of 1985, President Reagan and the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Rafsanjani, attempted a *détente* between Iran and the US through signaling mutual goodwill. The plan was for Iran to use its influence over Hezbollah in Lebanon to free seven American hostages and for the US to delivering arms to Iran. In essence, selling arms to Iran was an illegal move on the part of the US because there had been an embargo since January 1984 when Iran was designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

The supply of TOW and Hawk missiles started in August 1985. After the covert operations were revealed by his investigations, Attorney General Edwin Meese learned that part of the \$30 million that Iran paid for the weapons had not reached the US government's vault. Then Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a member of the US National Security Council staff, confessed that the discrepancy was because part of the proceeds of the arms sales to Iran had been diverted to the Contras, right-wing guerillas in Nicaragua who were fighting against the revolutionary leftist and democratically-elected Sandinista government. In the aftershock of the revelations, the National Security Advisor to President Reagan, Admiral John Poindexter, resigned, and Oliver North was dismissed.

There were two views in Iran (as there were in the US) about what motivated President Reagan to support the arms sales initiative. First, Reagan was thought to be obsessed with freeing the hostages in Lebanon. The other view was that Reagan and his administration sought to open the door to better relations with Iran, *détente*, and maybe eventually normalization of relations. This is the view that President Reagan would present as the motif of the deal with Iran. "My purpose," Reagan said in an address to the nation, "was ... to send a signal that the United States was prepared to replace the animosity between [the US and Iran] with a new relationship ... The most significant step which Iran could take, we indicated, would be to use its influence in Lebanon to secure the release of all hostages held there."⁴⁰ Rafsanjani told me that this was his objective, too. He told me that he had received positive messages for *détente* from Washington and that he was prepared to give it a chance.

Robert McFarlane's trip to Iran occurred after a few message exchanges between the two governments through mediatory channels. A delegation of six, headed by McFarlane, former US National Security Advisor, arrived in Tehran on May 25, 1986 to discuss arrangements for a possible deal.

No senior Iranian official met the Americans. According to the Iranians, McFarlane appeared unaware of the arrangements to which the Iranians had agreed through the mediators prior to their May 25 meeting. A member of the Iranian delegation told me that they were shocked to discover that an Israeli was among the US delegation. That had not been discussed or agreed beforehand. Hadi Najafabadi, an MP who later became Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and Fereidoun Vardinejad, from the Revolutionary Guard who later became Iranian ambassador to China, went to Tehran Airport to receive the American

delegation. The Americans were told that Tehran would never be able to have direct negotiations with the US if Israel were a party to the talks. Nevertheless, the Iranians informed McFarlane that regardless they would try to facilitate the release of American hostages in Lebanon and make the deal happen.

McFarlane insisted on meeting with a senior Iranian official, saying that he wanted to discuss issues beyond arms and a hostage deal. The Iranians perceived that McFarlane sought to discuss Iran–US relations and explore ways to improve those relations. Rafsanjani told me that he had already briefed Ayatollah Khomeini about the exchange of messages with Reagan prior to McFarlane’s trip to Tehran. However, Tehran opposed talks with the Americans once it became aware that Israel was involved. Rafsanjani, then the second most powerful man after Ayatollah Khomeini, supported negotiations and normalization of relations with the US. He viewed the state of “non-negotiation, no-relationship with America, unsustainable,” as he wrote in a handwritten letter to Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴¹ In his memoirs, Rafsanjani writes that he was informed that McFarlane, as a special envoy of President Reagan, had brought with him a pistol and a cake as presents and “asked to meet with the leaders [of Iran] ... It was decided not to accept the presents and not to meet [them] and to keep the negotiations ... limited to the issue of hostages in Lebanon and providing Hawk [spare] parts and some other weapons. They [McFarlane and his team] are more interested to talk about general and political issues [rather than simply the deal].⁴²

Americans were truly looking for a way to reduce tensions and move toward friendlier relations with Iran. However, Washington made a fatal mistake by involving the Israelis at the outset of a rapprochement effort with Tehran. Détente with the US during a war in which Washington was supporting the aggressor, Saddam Hussein, was already a very big political risk for Rafsanjani. Involvement of the Israelis would have been political suicide for him. Ultimately, McFarlane’s mission failed because Hezbollah had imposed conditions for releasing the American hostages which the Americans were unable to meet at that point. The hostage takers demanded Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the release of 17 prisoners held by Kuwait who belonged to the Dawa Party which waged an armed struggle against Saddam’s regime.

On October 15 and 16, 1986, a leaflet was circulated in Tehran which revealed the Americans’ trip to Tehran five months earlier. The person behind this sabotage was Mehdi Hashemi. Hashemi was

a radical, and brother to the son-in-law of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri. Ayatollah Montazeri had been chosen in November 1985 as the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini. More importantly, Mehdi Hashemi was the Director of the Office for Islamic Liberation of the IRGC. Mehdi Hashemi, by using Ayatollah Montazeri's office, bypassed the entire government and maintained relations and contacts with revolutionary Islamic groups in several Asian and African countries. It is noteworthy that Ayatollah Montazeri who later became a leading opposition to radical policies in Iran was the one who initiated and promoted the slogan of "Death to America" in Friday Prayers in early months after the victory of revolution while his son, Mohammad Montazeri, was one of the first officers and founders of the IRGC. In any case, Mehdi Hashemi was the first rogue element inside the Islamic Republic establishment, someone who created problems in foreign relations. He obviously had close contacts in Lebanon. Mehdi Hashemi was not only a radical anti-American, but also subscribed to a conspiratorial mentality. According to a video⁴³ of his confessions, before the revolution, he had murdered Ayatollah Shamsabadi, intending to frame the Shah's security service in order to incite rage among conservatives in Iran.⁴⁴

In any case, almost two weeks later, on November 3, 1986, through Mehdi's links in Lebanon, McFarlane's secret trip to Tehran and the dealings between Iran and the US were disclosed in the Lebanese magazine *Ash Shiraa* (or *Al-Shiraa*). Mehdi Hashemi was arrested on charges of murder and illegal activities in relation to foreign revolutionary groups, and subsequently executed. The office for Islamic Liberation was closed indefinitely. Whether Mehdi Hashemi's elimination and closure of the office for Islamic Liberation could be considered a statement—that export of revolution should be confined to words, and not involve deeds—remains an open question. Moreover, given his radical worldview and his close relationship with radical elements in Lebanon, the question of whether Hashemi was involved in the Beirut bombings also remains unanswered. However, a member of the Iranian team dealing with the McFarlane episode told me a different story. He said that the Israelis were involved in the revelation of the McFarlane visit to Tehran, with the purpose of creating a domestic crisis for Rafsanjani as the leading figure of the moderates in Iran.

With the revelation of McFarlane's mission to Tehran, the so called Iran-Contra scandal—the diversion of the proceeds of the US arms sales to Iran to Contra guerillas in Nicaragua—became so big that the

sincerity and integrity of Reagan and his administration was called into question. The US administration had violated its own laws by dealing with Hezbollah, a group designated by the same administration as terrorists.

This revelation also angered the Arab countries. To Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, the US appeared as hypocritical, duplicitous, and markedly unreliable. In Iran's perception, as a result of the public revelations, Reagan and the US administration assumed a much more hostile position toward Iran in order to restore their credibility internationally as well as domestically.

The US begins an Undeclared War against Iran

The removal of Iraq from the State Department's list of countries sponsoring terrorism in 1982 could only have been due to the desire to assist Saddam Hussein dismantle the revolution in Iran. This assumption was confirmed when the US crept into the war.

The Tanker War started in 1984 when Iraq attacked Iranian tankers as well as Kharg Island's oil terminal in the southern part of Iran in the Persian Gulf. This event marked the beginning of numerous tit-for-tat attacks on oil tankers from both sides. Iran also viewed Kuwait as "at war" against them, given that they were the second largest financial supporter of Iraq, after Saudi Arabia, and so Iranians began to attack Kuwaiti tankers as well. During four years of naval confrontations, hundreds of commercial vessels were damaged.

In response to Kuwait's support of Saddam's invasion of Iran, in 1986, Iran launched additional major attacks against Kuwaiti vessels. Following the attacks, Kuwait petitioned the international community, seeking help to protect its ships. The United States offered to fly the US flag on Kuwaiti tankers, thus committing itself to the protection of these tankers against Iran's attacks. The Iranians viewed Kuwait's petition as a US design and part of its broader plan to become actively involved in the war against Iran. In effect, this was an undeclared war by the US against Iran.

In October 1987, Iran attacked a Kuwaiti tanker flying the US flag. In response, the United States Navy attacked two Iranian oil fields and destroyed them. In April 1988, a US destroyer was badly damaged by the Iranian mines, and the American Navy again responded by attacking Iranian oil platforms as part of Operation Praying Mantis, the largest naval operation by the US since the Second World War. The

attacks destroyed the Sassan and Sirri oil platforms, resulting in the loss of several ships and scores of Iranian sailors.

Despite losing its suit against the United States for reparations at the International Court of Justice, the official statement that was issued clearly sympathized with Iran's case:

The Court thus concludes from the foregoing that the actions carried out by United States forces against Iranian oil installations on 19 October 1987 and 18 April 1988 cannot be justified, under Article XX, paragraph 1 (d), of the 1955 Treaty, as being measures necessary to protect the essential security interests of the United States⁴⁵

At the height of these confrontations came a horrific tragedy. On July 3, 1988, the USS *Vincennes* guided missile cruiser shot down a civilian Iranian aircraft. Iran Air Flight 655 departed from Iran and was destined for the United Arab Emirates, a flight that takes 30 minutes from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbass, the plane's final stop-over. According to American officials, the captain of the *Vincennes* misidentified the airplane as a F-14 fighter and ordered the firing of two missiles at it.⁴⁶ Flight 655 was destroyed, and all 290 passengers and crew, including 66 children, were killed. It was one of the worst tragedies in aviation history.

On September 8, 1988, the results of an investigation conducted by the US Central Command on the downing of Flight 655 were presented to the US Senate's Armed Services Committee. The investigation had been headed by US Central Command Director of Policy and Plans, Rear Admiral William M. Fogarty. He confirmed in his testimony that the Iranian plane *was* civilian. He stated that, "After an exhaustive reconstruction of the event, we now know that Iran Air Flight 655 was in fact always ascending in altitude and squawked only a Mode III signal on IFF, which is characteristic of a civilian aircraft. Iran Air 655 always flew inside the commercial airway."⁴⁷

Making matters worse, another nearby US warship, the USS *Sides*, had issued a message to the USS *Vincennes* confirming that the airplane in question was indeed civilian.⁴⁸ With all the technical equipment aboard pointing to the identification of Flight 655 as a civilian airliner, the USS *Vincennes* ignored this evidence and fired upon the airplane. In the face of all the contrary evidence, there seems to be no reasonable answer as to why the crew of the USS *Vincennes* was so certain that Flight 655 was a military plane and posed an imminent threat to anyone.

A simple comparison between the US reaction to the Pan Am passenger plane attacked by the Libyans at Lockerbie,⁴⁹ and the US attack on the Iranian civilian airplane demonstrates the US double standards. The US government never published a complete report of the investigations, failing even to condemn the killing of 290 innocent civilians.⁵⁰ In hearings before the US Senate, Admiral Robert Kelly, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asserted that Iran “must share some responsibility for this tragedy”!⁵¹

Years later, Rafsanjani told me that he perceived the attack as a signal that the United States would officially enter the war on the side of Iraq. “I was certain Iran could not prevail in a war against both Iraq *and* the United States, while they have no shame to use chemical weapons and attack civilian airplanes.” More than a quarter of a century later, the US Airbus attack, coupled with the use of chemical weapons against Iran, and the international community’s indifference to that crime, still shape the strategic thinking of the Iranian military leadership. To them, it appears that when it comes to Iran, no one would hesitate to break international laws and codes of conduct, in their aim to destroy the country. For many Iranians, these events reminded them how defenseless they were against foreign aggression, a position that forced Iran to build up a powerful military and defense system.

Unhealed Wounds

The Iraqi invasion occurred while Iran was still embroiled with the United States over the hostage crisis. The US public and its policy-makers would have felt deeply humiliated in the international arena if they were to side with Iran in this context. The US also viewed the Iranians as irrational and dangerous. It is true that the Iraqi government also had a strained relationship with the US, but that was much less serious than the head-on confrontation that Iran had with the US over hostage taking.

The US may also have been anxious about the “export of revolution” discourse that Iranians promoted as one of the goals of the revolution. In what was arguably the most important geostrategic region of the world for the US, the establishment of revolutionary, religion based political systems were perceived as posing a threat to US interests and security.

As mentioned earlier, the situation became more sensitive in 1982 when Iran pushed back Iraq and went on the offensive. Conventional

wisdom dictated that, given the majority Shia population of Iraq and Iran's close relations with the Iraqi Shia rebels who were prepared to challenge Saddam's rule,⁵² if Saddam were to be overthrown and a Shia-based government established, Iran would use the alliance of the two governments as a springboard to thwart the US hegemony in the region as well as to destabilize other regimes.

Furthermore, the prospect of trouble in the Strait of Hormuz and disruption of the oil supply by a hostile regional power was a nightmare scenario for America's struggling economy in the early 1980s. In 1982, US unemployment exceeded 10 percent for the first time in forty years.⁵³ A year before the downing of Flight 655, Richard W. Murphy, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, said in a testimony to Congress: "We would suffer a major strategic defeat should a power hostile to the United States sharply increase its power and influence in the region."⁵⁴

Hostage taking and terrorist activities in Lebanon against American assets, and the inclusion of Iran in the list of countries supporting terrorism, made it difficult for the US administration adopt a conciliatory approach towards Iran. And as we saw earlier, even limited dealings with Iran had inflicted significant damage on Reagan and his administration's credibility.

The rivalry between the USSR and the US also impacted on relations between Iran and the US. During those Cold War years, the US embraced the opportunity to establish a good relationship with Saddam Hussein who had warm relations with the Soviet Union, with a view to distancing him from the Soviet Union and ultimately using him as an instrument to confront Soviet expansionism.

Iranians, on the other hand, were convinced that the Iraqi invasion was orchestrated by the US in order to topple the Iranian *nezam*. There was no need to access sensitive intelligence to substantiate that view. The refusal of the United States to condemn the invasion, which was in clear violation of international law, could not have been an aberration. Yet, when Iran went on the offensive in 1982, the US made a statement that the two countries should recognize international borders and respect each other's territories.

A revelation in the *New York Times* confirmed the Iranians view that the United States' official position of neutrality was a deception. The report read:

The United States and other Western countries are therefore engaged in clandestine operations. The United States is financing Iranian exiles in paramilitary units in eastern Turkey near Iran, although

Turkey denies this. The United States is also financing Iranian exile networks in and out of Iran and an exile radio station that broadcasts propaganda about Iran's Government."⁵⁵

There is also extensive evidence from observers who have conducted research into the role of the United States in supporting Iraq. Alan Friedman's investigative book, *The Secret History of How the White House Illegally Armed Iraq*, is an example, using 60 pages of declassified documents and numerous interviews.⁵⁶ Details of the US activities in supporting Iraq are beyond the scope of this book, but one piece of information worth highlighting is Howard Teicher's declassified affidavit⁵⁷ of 1995. Teicher served as Director of Political-Military Affairs on the National Security Council from 1982 to 1987. In his affidavit, he stated that he traveled with Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad in 1983 when Rumsfeld met with Saddam Hussein and Tariq Aziz. Teicher recounted:

CIA Director Casey personally spearheaded the effort to ensure that Iraq had sufficient military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to avoid losing the Iran-Iraq war. Pursuant to the secret NSDD [National Security Decision Directive], the United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing U.S. military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required. The United States also provided strategic operational advice to the Iraqis to better use their assets in combat. For example, in 1986, President Reagan sent a secret message to Saddam Hussein telling him that Iraq should step up its air war and bombing of Iran. This message was delivered by Vice President Bush who communicated it to Egyptian President Mubarak, who in turn passed the message to Saddam Hussein. Similar strategic operational military advice was passed to Saddam Hussein through various meetings with European and Middle Eastern heads of state.⁵⁸

Was Iran's assessment that the US would encourage Saddam to bomb Iran's cities and civilians correct or was it just based on their mistrust of the US and their conspiratorial mindset? Evidence such as Teicher's sworn declaration points to the former.

One of the most troubling aspects of this whole affair was that Iran firmly believed that without US knowledge and consent, it would have

been impossible for the Iraqi government to gain access to chemical weapons. A 1994 report by Donald Riegle, Chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, stated that:

U.N. inspectors had identified many United States manufactured items that had been exported from the United States to Iraq under licenses issued by the Department of Commerce, and [established] that these items were used to further Iraq's chemical and nuclear weapons development and its missile delivery system development programs ... The executive branch of our government approved 771 different export licenses for sale of dual-use technology to Iraq. I think that is a devastating record.⁵⁹

Iran sought condemnation from the international community by introducing a draft resolution to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1984. In response, the US delegation was instructed by the State Department to lobby other countries, ensuring that the resolution would not amount to anything substantive. The official US position was outlined in a Department of State telegram: "USDEL [US Delegation to the United Nations] should work to develop general Western position in support of a motion to take 'no decision' on Iranian draft resolution on use of chemical weapons by Iraq."⁶⁰

Satellite imagery and its interpretation by US advisors allowed Iranian military positions and its troop deployment to be assessed, in effect exposing the Iranians as sitting ducks—waiting for the inevitable assault against them. According to Allan Friedman, "At times, thanks to the White House's secret backing for the intelligence-sharing, U.S. intelligence officers were actually sent to Baghdad to help interpret the satellite information."⁶¹

Downing the Iran Air passenger flight created a scar that to date has not been healed. Iranians were left in no doubt that the attack was intentional, confirmed by the award of Combat Action Ribbons to the crew of the *Vincennes* crew. Scott Lustig, the ship's weapons and combat systems officer, received the Navy Commendation Medal. And the captain of the USS *Vincennes*, William C. Rogers, was awarded the Legion of Merit "for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service as commanding officer ... from April 1987 to May 1989."⁶²

Navy officials said the medals were awarded to the crew for their "contributions to the USS *Vincennes* over their entire tour on board."⁶³

But in a climate filled with hostility and mistrust, the granting of awards to the *Vincennes* crew could have only one meaning for the Iranian leadership—that the crew and their commanders were to be commended for their heroic action in killing the 290 passengers of Iran Air flight 655. The US government never apologized for the horrific mistake. They only expressed regret.⁶⁴

Chalice of Poison

In July 1987 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 598 calling upon Iran and Iraq to establish a ceasefire. Iran rejected the resolution. Ayatollah Khomeini's intention was to fight until Saddam Hussein was toppled. He viewed Saddam as a permanent potential threat to the security of Iran and the region, especially when his expansionism was supported by the entire West, and in particular, the United States. Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini believed that Saddam's overthrow would liberate the majority Shias in Iraq, a development that would enhance Iran's position in the region.

At the time, mention of a ceasefire was equated with treachery. Around January 1988, I was invited to visit Japan by the Japanese government. Although my trip to Japan was in my capacity as editor-in-chief of the *Tehran Times*, it was also known that I had a close relationship with Rafsanjani in my capacity as the Chairman of the Parliament Administration Organization. An unpublicized meeting was arranged with a high-level diplomat at Japan's Foreign Ministry. At the time, Rafsanjani was chairman of the parliament and had also been appointed acting Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Japanese official asked, "Can we do something? You present all the Iranians' reasons that Iran should not accept the ceasefire and I will tell you my reasons why you should. Then put all the debate together and present it to Iranian decision makers. Will you do it?" I agreed, and a heated debate ensued. But the most interesting part came at the conclusion of our meeting. I was told: "Listen, Mr. Mousavian. While Iraq has failed to defeat Iran, the US and other great powers have made their decision not to let a winner emerge from this war. They would not let Iran win this war. You are wasting your resources, human lives, and time." That revelation was profoundly shocking.

Upon my return to Tehran, I provided a full written account of the debate to Rafsanjani. I showed him the whole back-and-forth

argument between me and the Japanese official. But I also revealed the conclusion of the meeting, which was not recorded in the written account. “He had a message for you!” I told him what the Japanese official had said, and Rafsanjani replied, “Now what do you want to do?” I told him that I wanted to publish the conversation with no comments. He said, “I am very much agreeable.” I was stunned. “To me it sounds that you are also for a ceasefire,” I said to Rafsanjani. “Yes” was his simple reply. He added that he was looking for a face-saving solution to end the war. This position was at variance with Iran’s official stance, which was that Iran would fight on until the Ba’athist regime in Baghdad fell.

I published the explosive interview in two parts. It was the first time any form of media had addressed the ceasefire question—and I was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and strongly criticized. “This article advocates a ceasefire while Iran has opposed the resolution 598,” said one high-level official.

The debate over a ceasefire gradually emerged in the government’s inner circles. By spring 1988, that debate had grown much louder. In June of that year, Rafsanjani, in his position of acting Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, told me that he had asked the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, Mohsen Rezaie, what was necessary to conclude the war. Rezaie had responded with the view that Baghdad should be seized and Saddam should be toppled. Rafsanjani asked Rezaie to document what he needed to achieve that goal. In a letter to Rafsanjani, Rezaie listed his requirements for the capture of Baghdad: a huge amount of arms and artillery and a considerable expansion of the armed forces, including a 700 percent increase in IRGC forces and a 150 percent increase of the regular army. According to a plan prepared by the IRGC and presented to Rafsanjani, the IRGC required 1,500 battalions to attack three targets: Basra in the south with 500 battalions; Kirkuk in the north with 400 battalions; and Baghdad with 600 battalions. The operation would take one and a half years.

Rezaie’s letter to Rafsanjani was taken to Ayatollah Khomeini. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and his ministers of Economy and Budget and Planning told Ayatollah Khomeini that financially, the *nezam* was in the red. Ultimately, however, the person who convinced Ayatollah Khomeini to stop the war was Hashemi Rafsanjani. The reality is that nobody was in a position to talk to Ayatollah Khomeini about such a painful decision. However, Rafsanjani’s friends and foes both acknowledge that Rafsanjani played

a major role in convincing Ayatollah Khomeini to accept the ceasefire. In a public statement on July 20, 1988, Ayatollah Khomeini accepted the ceasefire and stated, “Happy are those who have lost their lives in this convoy of light ... unhappy am I that I survive and have drunk the poisoned chalice.”

I believe that Rafsanjani’s pragmatism served Iran’s best interests, although some in Iran’s establishment continue to disagree, arguing that Iran should have fought to the end. Those who disagree also maintain that Rafsanjani imposed the decision on the Iranian revolution’s leader by exaggerating the struggle ahead and painting a grim picture of the economy.

From my perspective, events at that point were on a trajectory toward all-out war between Iran and the United States. Such a war might have ended in the destruction of Iran’s infrastructure and US assets in the region and beyond. And, as former Defense Secretary Robert Gates once put it, bombing Iran would “create generations of jihadists.”⁶⁵ A US attack on Iran could not have been confined within the borders of Iran. The result would have been to “consume the Middle East in a confrontation and a conflict” that Americans “would regret,” according to former U. S. Secretary of Defense top Pentagon official Leon Panetta.⁶⁶

Ayatollah Khomeini’s move has become the basis of a policy-shaping argument in the West; that is, that once the survival of the *nezam* hits the danger zone, it retreats. This is the primary rationale behind the current tough sanctions imposed on Iran to force it to halt its nuclear program. However, Ayatollah Khomeini accepted a ceasefire in the Iran–Iraq War, but in doing so, his country did not surrender any territory, and he did not compromise his country’s independence. That is why on January 31, 2014, I told the Iranian news agency, ISNA, that resolution 598 was not a poisoned chalice.⁶⁷ Despite the ceasefire, the new revolutionary government actually succeeded in consolidating its authority during the eight years of the war. Essentially, the ceasefire was about allowing Saddam to survive as a leader, and as a man. The fact that Iran entered into a ceasefire with Iraq, was about standing down rather than giving up. And it certainly was not a matter of surrendering to a perceived strategic enemy and “global arrogance.”⁶⁸ Therefore, the analogy between Iran accepting the ceasefire and giving up to the US sanctions is flawed.

Chapter 4

A PRAGMATIST ASSUMES THE PRESIDENCY 1989-97

The Rise of Ayatollah Khomeini

Ayatollah Khomeini died at 10.00 p.m. June 2, 1989, but the news broke the day after. Millions of Iranians spilled onto the streets of large and small cities to mourn the death of the Iranian Revolution's charismatic leader. The death of Iran's leader coincided with major challenges and concerns domestically and internationally. Although Iran and Iraq had accepted the terms of a ceasefire, peace was not yet established. In fact, shortly after Iran accepted the principle of a ceasefire, Iraq launched a major attack aimed at permanently occupying Khuzestan. When Ayatollah Khomeini died, the situation on the borders with Iraq was still uneasy and uncertain. Meanwhile, due to the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for the publication of his book, *The Satanic Verses*, Iran's relations with Europe were tense and confrontational. Domestically, the death of the revolution's leader, who had no obvious successor, could have plunged the country into anarchy. A major part of the country was war-torn, millions were displaced, the some two million Afghan refugees were resident, and the economy was in a shambles as a result of war.

It was against this backdrop that the Assembly of Leadership Experts met on June 4, 1989 to decide who was to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini. There was heated debate over whether the position of Supreme Leader (*vali-e faqih*) should be filled by one figure, or a three- or five-person council. Interestingly, both Ayatollahs Khomeini and Rafsanjani supported the idea of electing a Council of Leadership as opposed to one figure as Supreme Leader. They reasoned that there was no one person of sufficient capacity and calibre to fill Ayatollah Khomeini's position. The idea was voted on but not approved.

The question became one of identifying a candidate capable of becoming Iran's next Supreme Leader. According to the constitution,

the Supreme Leader had to be a *Marja-e Taqlid* (source of emulation), but the Assembly did not find anyone in Qom politically qualified for the task. In April 1989, two months before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini had established a 25-man Council for Revision of the Constitution. One of the major amendments that Ayatollah Khomeini had asked the council to consider was a to change the conditions regarding the qualifications of the Supreme Leader—specifically that his successor would not need to be a *Marja-e Taqlid* as long as he was qualified as a *mujtahid*, a level below *Marja-e Taqlid*, a jurist who is qualified to interpret Islamic laws and to generate religiously-credible decisions. Ayatollah Khomeini's concern was that the constitution would limit the options of the Assembly of Leadership Experts to just a few, and that therefore after his death the election of the new Supreme Leader could descend into a stalemate. Yet, the constitutional amendment had to be legalized through a referendum.

The meeting of the Assembly of Leadership Experts on June 4, 1989, was interrupted by Hassan Rouhani who informed Rafsanjani that the Iraqis were mobilizing their forces on the western front. This news encouraged the Assembly to expedite the decision-making process. The suggestion was raised by some members of the Assembly that since the Ayatollah Khomeini had approved the idea of a *mujtahid* being qualified for the Supreme Leadership, then from a religious point of view there was no obstacle to electing a non-*marja* as leader. However, they had to wait for the outcome of the referendum. So the decision was made to elect a *mujtahid* as the Supreme Leader but wait for the completion of the legal process.

After Grand Ayatollah Golpayegani was named as a candidate, but did not win the majority of the votes, the focus was turned to Ayatollah Khamenei. Ayatollah Rafsanjani's testimony played a major role in the election of Ayatollah Khamenei. Rafsanjani said that after the resignation of Ayatollah Montazeri as the heir of Ayatollah Khomeini, in March, he and a number of high-ranking officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei who was the president at the time, met with the ailing Ayatollah Khomeini. He said that concern was expressed about a possible vacuum in the absence of the Ayatollah, to which he responded, "There won't be a vacuum. You have people [who can fill in]." When the Ayatollah was asked who he had in mind he said, "This Mr. Khamenei."¹ Rafsanjani also told the Assembly that on another occasion when he had met Ayatollah Khomeini alone, he had again asked, "Given the current situation [of a lack of any successor for you] what should we do about leadership?" He quoted Ayatollah

Khomeini as replying, “Why are you hesitant while [a person like] Mr. Khamenei exists?”²

The deal was sealed. On that hot and fateful day of June 4, 1989, members of the Assembly of Leadership of Experts cast their ballots to choose Ayatollah Khamenei. He received an overwhelmingly endorsement, with 60 out of 74 votes in his favor. In his televised remarks, Ayatollah Khamenei said, “We hope temporarily to fill the leadership while the terms of the new constitution are under review.”³ He added that the vacuum had to be filled but whether that would be temporary or permanent depended on the approval of the amendments to the constitution.

The referendum was held on July 28, alongside the presidential elections, and the amendments were approved by the electorate. This eliminated the need for the Supreme Leader to be a *Marja-e Taqlid*, abolished the post of prime minister, and created the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).

Ayatollah Khamenei’s statement after his election contains interesting points which reflected his view about his election:

I did not expect, even for a second in my life, the outcome of the process which ended in my election as the new leader and the responsibility that was put on my shoulder as a humble weak servant of Allah. If someone thinks that it occurred to me even for a second at the time of struggle [against the Shah], later during the revolution, or during my term of presidency that this responsibility would be delegated to me, he is wrong. I always considered my level [of qualifications] too low for this highly significant and crucial post but also even much lower posts like the presidency and other posts, which I have held since the revolution.

Once I told Imam ... that sometimes my name is cited among some gentlemen while I am like common people. I did not say it as a matter of courtesy. Now, I maintain the same position. Therefore, this event was not imaginable at all. Of course, we had very sensitive hours, the most serious hours of our lives [during the Assembly meeting]. Allah knows what we experienced that night and the Saturday morning. To fulfill their duty, brothers were strenuously thinking and working to tidy the affairs up. Frequently, they talked about me as a member of [the] leadership council although I rejected it in my mind. However, it was possible that they would delegate it to me.

Then I sought refuge to Allah. The next day, before the Assembly

of Experts started its work, I cried and supplicated to Allah earnestly, “My Lord, you plan and predestine the affairs. I may become responsible as a member of the leadership council. I implore you, in case this post is going to be a little bit harmful for my religion and for me on the Day of Judgment, to prevent its realization.” Really, from the bottom of my heart, I wanted not to take this responsibility.

Finally, after some debates and talks in the Assembly of Experts, they voted for me. There I tried, debated, and reasoned to prevent the vote but they voted. Even now, I consider myself as a common religious student without any outstanding feature of special advantage, not only for this great office of significant responsibility—as I said sincerely—but also for much less important ones like the presidency, etc. delegated to me during the last ten years [since the revolution]. However, now that they had voted for me to bear its burden and responsibility, I accept it vigorously just as Allah advised His prophets, “Take it rigorously.”⁴

Beginning of a New Era

Ayatollahs Khamenei and Rafsanjani had different views on the United States.⁵ However, both Ayatollahs were actively involved in anti-Shah activities and both were imprisoned during the Shah’s reign.

In his hand-written will prepared in 1963, Ayatollah Khamenei presented a list of the people that he owed money to. The will noted, “The most money that I owed ... was to Mr. Hashemi [Rafsanjani]. For he was well-off and we would borrow from him.”⁶ Rafsanjani believed that the two men had to and would stay united because they both were committed to protecting the revolution. This was also what their mentor, Ayatollah Khomeini, sought from them. Three days before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini, in broken words, told Rafsanjani, “If you stay united, the revolution will progress. Especially you and Mr. Khamenei—do not let the wicked provoke enmity between you.”⁷

During his presidency (1989–97), Rafsanjani advocated and pursued reconciliation with the West—specifically, but indirectly, with the United States—based on mutual respect, non-interference in domestic affairs, and advancing mutual interests. This political paradigm took into account the severity of animosity between the two countries and the historical grievances each held, yet persisted in its optimism about

the possibility of achieving normalization in relations based on both parties' national interests.

President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a prominent Iranian politician best characterized as a centrist, advanced a free-market economic policy, favoring privatization of state-owned industries, and a moderate position internationally. While Ayatollah Khamenei, newly appointed as Supreme Leader, agreed in principle with the objective of improving relations with the West, he reiterated that United States would remain as rival. From the Supreme Leader's point of view, as Rafsanjani informed me, any direct negotiation with the US was prohibited. Ayatollah Khamenei reaffirmed this position in his public statements: "I am against negotiations with the United States and it is impossible for the Islamic Republic administration to enter any form of negotiations without my permission ... the relations with the US is a red line, one which no one can cross."⁸ He added, "Of course we reject relations with the US, because the US is arrogant, [an] aggressor and [an] oppressive power ... those who believe we should negotiate with the US are either naïve or intimidated, because the US primary goal has been from the beginning of the Islamic Revolution to annihilate us."⁹

The Supreme Leader's position posed a major obstacle to any attempt at détente with the US. At that time, I was the General Director for European Affairs at Iran's Foreign Ministry, where we believed it would be possible to normalize relations with the West, despite the hostilities that remained between the US and Iran. We in the Foreign Ministry proposed to Rafsanjani that détente with the West was a package, which included the United States. Removing hostilities and tensions with the West could make headway toward rapprochement with Washington. Rafsanjani agreed with us.

Rafsanjani placed great importance on normalizing relations with the West, as this would also serve Iran's national interest—a point he made clear to me as I contemplated the next steps of my career. In late September 1990, the Iranian Foreign Ministry offered me the option of becoming Iranian ambassador to China or Germany. Faced with the choice to go East or West, I sought consultation with Rafsanjani, who advised me to take the German ambassadorship. In a meeting on October 4 of that year, he told me:

You could solve some of our major problems with Europe during the last two or three years. [As the Director for European Affairs at the Foreign Ministry] you were under tremendous domestic

pressure [from the hardliners who reject improvement of relations with the West] for working to resolve our problems with Europe. But you resisted those pressures and resolved some major issues in our bilateral relations with European countries.¹⁰ Your presence in Europe is important for us; you are close to us and we trust you. Germany is a major element of the power nucleus of Europe and we want you to be the pillar of reconciling our relations with Europe.

He further referred to the Supreme Leader's doctrine on the relations with the West—the “West minus the United States”—and noted that we would pursue improved relations with all other Western countries, except the United States, because the leader was convinced that the US sought regime change and not a normal relationship based on mutual respect. He asserted, however:

Through appropriate channels, you should make the Americans comprehend that if they are sincere in improving relations with us, the only way is to show goodwill such as releasing our assets. Return of assets would enable us to begin the process of détente with the Americans, while the process of securing the release of the Western hostages has already begun. They should be patient for a year after releasing our assets and they should also assist with the release of Sheik Obeid [Shia Lebanese leader] and other Lebanese hostages [held by the Israelis]. If they do this, we will be able to help them resolve their problems [with regard to the hostages] in Lebanon. On my behalf, tell the German president and chancellor that Iran is ready to be a reliable partner for Europe to advance peace, security, and stability in the Middle East.

I left Rafsanjani's office with the following deductions. First, despite restrictions placed by Ayatollah Khamenei on reviving relations and negotiations with the US, we should initiate the normalization of relations with Europe while continuing efforts for a decrease in the tensions with the United States. Second, Germany could be the means of cementing Iran's relations with Europe. Third, Rafsanjani would be in a position to convince the Supreme Leader to pursue détente with the US if the Americans showed their readiness for a relationship based on mutual respect, and made gestures of practical goodwill such as the release of Iran's assets. In other words, he recognized the Leader's deep mistrust of the US but did not view the Supreme Leader's position as

something written in the stone. In Rafsanjani's assessment, peace was possible with the Americans if they showed a genuine willingness to change their perceived hostile policies toward Iran. Fourth, the release of Western hostages, coupled with the liberation of Sheik Obeid and other Lebanese hostages that were kept by the Israelis, could be a beginning that would lead to further confidence-building measures between Iran and the West/US, leading to broader regional cooperation in the Middle East.

I decided to go to Bonn, and arrived there some days after reunification of the west and the east. I was the first foreign ambassador to the reunited Germany, a position I held until 1997.

Meanwhile, in Iran, the hardliner strategy was to attack moderates led by Rafsanjani and accuse anyone who supported better relations with the United States of being "anti-Guardianship of the Jurist" (*zedd-e valayat-e faqih*). Adopting radical slogans, the hardliners attacked centrists and moderates and attempted to force them to withdraw from their positions. Ayatollah Khamenei shared their mistrust of US intentions toward the revolution, and believed that there was a need to balance any move towards the US. Until the Americans demonstrated signs of peace and recognition of the revolution, he did not want to take the risk. However, he did not strictly forbid Rafsanjani from pursuing his reconciliatory policies toward the US, although he publicly showed no sign of softening his position.

Throughout his presidency, Rafsanjani faced huge pressure from hardliners for seeking a constructive and proactive diplomacy with the West, and for providing sufficient opportunity and assistance in a variety of areas for the West to cooperate and advance bilateral relations. Regrettably, the West—more importantly, Washington—failed to recognize the real intentions of Rafsanjani's pragmatic foreign policy, which was aimed at reaching agreement with the United States through different channels and the use of every instrument at his disposal. Instead, the lack of reciprocity toward Tehran's overtures ensured that radicalism remained relevant in the Iranian politics to derail any hopes of rapprochement with the West and the United States.

Broken Promises and the Failure of Rafsanjani

In early 1989 the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon was a critical issue facing the United States and European countries.¹¹

Meanwhile, the war between Iran and Iraq had ended, leaving Iran's economy in ruins and in desperate need of resources for a reconstruction effort. President Rafsanjani's foreign policy was based on détente with regional countries and the international community in order to attract the resources needed to revive the Iranian economy. One of the most complicated foreign policy dilemmas was how to engage with the West.

During this period, Iran received encouraging messages that "goodwill begets goodwill" from Washington. President George H. W. Bush's inaugural address on January 20, 1989 gave the first indication that the US would welcome and reciprocate any form of assistance from Iran on the hostage crisis:

There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on.¹²

Furthermore, President Bush acknowledged US correspondence with Iran regarding the liberation of eight American hostages:

I am open-minded to talk and to exercise every diplomatic channel I can to free these Americans¹³ ... We have exercised every diplomatic channel that I can think of—some personal, some through our secretary of state and our national security adviser [Brent Scowcroft].¹⁴

President Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati¹⁵ appointed Deputy Foreign Minister for US and European Affairs Mahmoud Vaezi¹⁶ and myself to manage the release of hostages in Lebanon. Mr. Rafsanjani made certain that Iranian security establishments received clear instructions to cooperate with the two of us in this effort. The key contact person between the Americans and Iran was Giandomenico Picco, United Nations Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs,¹⁷ who collaborated with Javad Zarif,¹⁸ Iran's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Rafsanjani believed that a period of "goodwill for goodwill" would be a good starting point for bridging the troubles of the past and establishing confidence-building measures, leading toward a permanent peace with the United States. However, Ayatollah Khamenei had reservations about the true intentions of the Americans and believed that

Iran should assist with the release of the Western hostages purely on the grounds of moral principles and as a humanitarian gesture. Extremely suspicious about the true intentions of the United States, Ayatollah Khamenei cautioned against naively trusting and expecting the United States to respond appropriately following the efforts undertaken by Iran to free the hostages. In a 1990 speech regarding the matter, he asserted:

Of course we announced from the beginning that we would help free the hostages to the best of our ability. We are not the superiors of the hostage-takers; they are a group of oppressed people who have for various reasons taken these hostages. The extent to which our words carry weight, we will help [release the hostages], but for our values, principles and humanitarian efforts and not for [dealing with] the US. Furthermore, suppose someone is going to do it for [dealing with] the US, what would be the American response?¹⁹

There is a misperception in the West with regard to the nature of the relationship between Hezbollah and the Iranian government. It is true that Hezbollah was founded with the assistance of Iran and that Iran has supported the group throughout the years of its existence. It is also true that the strategic vision of Hezbollah, which is opposed to the aggressive policies of Israel and US domination in the region, coincides with Iran's. However, I can speak with confidence that in many cases the two operate quite independently.

In any case, Ayatollah Khamenei did not want to associate the issue of the hostages in Lebanon with the release of Iran's assets by the Americans because he was convinced the American would not reciprocate Iranian goodwill. He saw it as the right of the nation to have its assets restored and not something to be bargained for. "The Americans owe us. Our assets are frozen there and they should return it [*sic*]. This is their debt to us and our right, which has nothing to do with political issues. The assets should be returned to its owner."²⁰

The course of action to be taken in response to the Americans' offer of "goodwill for goodwill" caused a divergence between the schools of thought led by Ayatollahs Khamenei and Rafsanjani. In meetings I had with Rafsanjani on the hostages issue, he reaffirmed that there was no difference between the Supreme Leader and him on the need for Iran to assist with the release of the hostages. However, he added that Ayatollah Khamenei did not like proceeding with this initiative based on President George H. W. Bush's proposal of "goodwill for goodwill," due to his profound doubt that the US administration would deliver

any goodwill. Nonetheless, he reiterated that our grand strategy for détente with the West required removing the hostility between Tehran and Washington with a gradual move toward normal relations.

In my capacity as editor-in-chief of the *Tehran Times*, I utilized the newspaper as an outlet to disseminate developments on the hostage crisis. Hence the paper became known to the international community and Western media as the most reliable source of information inside Iran on the issue.^{21 22}

In contrast to Ayatollah Khamenei, Rafsanjani was highly motivated to respond to President George H. W. Bush's reconciliatory words. The American president's message to Hashemi Rafsanjani [Farsi], Excerpt from Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani's Book titled "Moderation and Victory" (Memoirs of 1980).²³ The crux of the deal would be Iran's demonstration of its goodwill by assisting with the release of American and Western hostages in Lebanon. Rafsanjani's expectation was that in exchange for the release of the hostages, Iranian assets worth billions of dollars would be unfrozen and returned. The funds from the assets, once released, would be critical for Rafsanjani's gigantic reconstruction plan and facilitate a much-needed revival of Iran's economy. Meanwhile, in order to convince Hezbollah to cooperate, Rafsanjani would ask the Americans to push Israel to free Lebanese hostages, primarily Sheikh Obeid. Obeid was a senior Hezbollah cleric and a military commander of the Islamic Resistance who was abducted by Israeli forces on July 28, 1989.

A few days after the abduction of Obeid, footage was released showing the hanging of the US Marine Lt. Col. William Higgins. The footage took the American media by storm. In the same footage, hostage-takers threatened that they would kill a second hostage. Bush then implicitly threatened to use military force against Iran.²⁴ Rafsanjani responded by saying that "One cannot solve the problem with such bullying ways, with arrogant confrontations and tyranny. Come along wisely; we then will help you to solve the problems."²⁵ This lack of appreciation of Iran's traditional deep roots of resistance has always bedeviled Iran-US relations. Cost and benefit calculations and pragmatism fade in the face of coercion and a sense of humiliation.

Several days later we reported in the *Tehran Times* that indirect talks would commence in a few days. The report said, "The talks would be conducted through a third country, probably Pakistan, and likely would involve Pakistani Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan."²⁶ Following this report, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported that Iran was "ready to use its maximum influence for the

release of all hostages” if the US released Iranian assets worth billions of dollars it had frozen ten years earlier.²⁷ But Ayatollah Khamenei reacted negatively to the reports: “Next to the usurper regime ruling over occupied Palestine, you [Americans] are the most cursed government in the eyes of the Iranian people. No one in the Islamic Republic will hold talks with you.” These developments occurred in August 1989, shortly after Rafsanjani was sworn in as the new president.

Toward the end of August 1989, Giandomenico Picco delivered a message to Rafsanjani. He said that the Americans demanded that the hostages be released first before they could consider a positive response to Iranian demands. Rafsanjani countered that he perceived an “attitude of talking from the upper-hand position” in America’s stance. Therefore he now required that certain conditions be met before Iran would take any action: Sheikh Obeid had to be freed; Iran’s assets should be released; and the US had to help Iran clarify the fate of the Iranian hostages in Lebanon. In June 1982, four Iranian diplomats, Ahmad Motavasselian, Mohammed-Taghi Rastegar Moghadam, Mohsen Musavi (*chargé d’affaires* at the Iranian Embassy) and Kazem Akhavan, a photographer, were abducted and later “disappeared.”²⁸

However, Rafsanjani conveyed his deep disappointment that Iran had been linked to the killing of Higgins, an act from which Iran would clearly not benefit other than to provoke more hostility from the US.

Three weeks later, Iran offered something that had the potential to be a game changer. Through Picco, Velayati sent a message to the UN Secretary General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, that the process of releasing the hostages could begin if the Americans would release 10 percent of the frozen assets and pay compensation for the victims of the passenger plane that had been downed by the Americans. Iran thought that this could be a face-saving solution to begin the process. Iran, via Pérez de Cuéllar, was told that Washington would consider the offer, not necessarily indicating acceptance.

Meanwhile, Tehran and Washington had an unwritten understanding that the official and public position on the release of hostages ought to be based on humanitarian principles and not a deal. To that extent, the US State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler asserted, “The hostage issue is a humanitarian one and is not linked to other issues ... we will not make deals and we will not reward hostage takers.”²⁹

While we were clear on our expectations, we decided to leave no room for error by going public with them. Thus, President Rafsanjani held a press conference on October 24, 1989 where more than

100 reporters and television crews attended. Following the press conference, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the “goodwill for goodwill” initiative:

“[Rafsanjani] repeated specifically his demand that the United States demonstrate ‘good will’ by releasing impounded Iranian assets ... Rafsanjani repeated a second demand: release of three Iranians taken hostage in Lebanon in 1982.³⁰ The president also brought attention to the disregard for the value of the Iranian hostages and emphasized, “You have to have the same feelings and sentiments toward other people as you do to people in the West.”³¹

It was my understanding that Americans might have been disappointed by these statements because they did not want the release of hostages to be associated with “a deal.” This was what had already damaged Reagan’s credibility during the Iran–Contra scandal. But on the other hand, what would “goodwill begets goodwill” mean if Iran was not to receive reciprocity? The George H. W. Bush administration’s cautious approach was understandable. He was the third consecutive president of the United States who had faced the hostages challenge. Tehran, however, chose to ignore that fact.

Throughout the process, the Iranians ensured that their major demands were not sidelined in the “goodwill for goodwill” initiative, clearly expecting reciprocity. After Frank Herbert Reed’s³² release in Beirut, the *New York Times* wrote, “The *Tehran Times*, considered the mouthpiece of President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran, said, ‘Now the ball is in the court of the U.S. and the Western countries.’”³³

The role of Iran in the freeing of the Western hostages in Lebanon was highlighted in the international media following the release of Americans Robert Polhill on April 23,³⁴ and Frank Reed on April 30, 1990.³⁵ In his memoir Rafsanjani says, “Mr. Mousavian from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came [to see me]. He said that the Swiss ambassador, Protector of the US interests in Iran, has brought a message from [George H. W.] Bush, the president of America. [According to Mousavian] he [President Bush] had privately thanked us for the release of [Robert] Polhill, the American hostage, and had said that Hafiz Assad, the Syrian president, had informed him that Iran’s assistance had been instrumental in that respect. And he [Bush] had said that based on the US intelligence, the Iranian hostages captured by the Maronites [in Lebanon] had been killed the very first days...I said [to Mousavian] to verbally let them know that if the Lebanese prisoners are not released from Israel the issue of the hostages [and the release of the rest of them] would become more complicated.”³⁶ The Americans,

through the Swiss, were told that Iran expected an appropriate gesture from George H.W. Bush in response. Rafsanjani hoped to capitalize on any such gesture, silence those who opposed his policy of détente, and give momentum to the process of reconciliation. While Tehran awaited conciliatory news from America, President Bush's response was, "When a step is taken that goes toward that day when all the hostages are released, I should say thank you."³⁷

Following my visit to Dublin a few months earlier, Irish hostage and English teacher Brian Keenan was also released on August 24, 1990.³⁸ Finally Terry Anderson, the last American hostage in Lebanon, was freed on December 4, 1991 after Iranian intervention.^{39,40} "Incomprehensible" was how we characterized President Bush's reaction the next day:

I don't consider the chapter closed because I think of Robin Higgins, a young Marine whose husband was apparently killed. And I'd like to see the remains of Colonel Higgins, who was serving under the UN banner, returned. And so this chapter, this ugly chapter, albeit nearly closed, is not yet closed. And so we'll wait and see when that is all finalized.⁴¹

Did that mean that there would not be a single step of reciprocation by the US in line with their own initiative of "goodwill for goodwill"? Weeks later, the remains of Col. Higgins were also returned.

In his memoir *Man Without A Gun*, Giandomenico Picco detailed the urgency for the Americans to reciprocate Iran's goodwill since "it was nearly four months since Terry Anderson, the last of the American hostages in Beirut, had been freed, and the Iranians were growing restless. It was time for Washington to deliver its part of the implied quid pro quo."⁴² He continued:

[US National Security Advisor] Scowcroft had intimated at our first two meetings that the United States might have some difficulty living up to its "promise" of three years earlier. Even so, I held out hope that the administration would give me something I could take to the Iranians. Perhaps I was in denial: The idea that a word given would not be kept was unacceptable to me, since my credibility had been essential to the success of my work.⁴³

Picco's frustration with the US administration for not living up to their promise paled in comparison to what Rafsanjani had to endure back

in Tehran. Picco expressed his regret for the failure of the deal and for not letting the Iranians know sooner of the fact that no deal was imminent, particularly since “Scowcroft made it official in April [1992 that] there would be no gesture toward Iran anytime soon ... Whatever the reasons, a three-year operation in Beirut built on a foundation of trust had suddenly turned to sand. Unwittingly—naively, as it turned out—I had misled an entire [Iranian] government.”⁴⁴

The effect was devastating for the credibility of all involved, including the *Iranian pragmatists*, who had taken on an immense risk with the hope that the US would keep its word that “goodwill begets goodwill.” The action of the US had inevitably not only significantly reduced the prospects of rapprochement but had also damaged the hand of proponents of Rafsanjani’s school of thought, thereby strengthening the position taken by hardliners who always placed stress on the unreliable nature of the US government. The extent of the political risk taken by Rafsanjani and his supporters and the degree to which they had put their credibility on the line was illustrated in Picco’s own experience:

My failure to deliver the American side of the deal with the Iranians essentially rendered me a liar ... Going to Tehran was exactly what I had to do. I had to look into the eyes of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and acknowledge my inadvertent deception. Nothing less would do.⁴⁵

Picco described his meeting with Rafsanjani in some detail:

[Javad] Zarif took me to see Rafsanjani. It was our first meeting since all the American hostages had returned home from Lebanon ... [I told Rafsanjani] that I had come to Tehran with news of broken promises. I explained that although the hostage operation had been based on the assumption that a goodwill gesture from America would be offered, I had been informed by Washington that no reciprocity would be forthcoming.⁴⁶ Rafsanjani confused and dismayed points to the Iranian overtures and the great deal of political capital invested in having the hostages released and the internal disputes that were fought to allow such measures to take place, stating, “We have assisted you in Lebanon out of respect for the United Nations Secretary General. We have taken many political risks in our cooperation with you. Not everybody was in favor of such cooperation. Nevertheless, we went ahead. Since we engaged in this effort, we have listened carefully to what you told us, including

all the various assurances. You understand, Mr. Picco, that you are putting me in a very difficult position. In fact, it may be a very difficult position for both of us ... The first thing I could do here is to decide never to let you leave Tehran ... I am sad to hear that this is the reason you came. I think it is best if you leave Tehran very, very quickly. The news of what you have told me will travel fast to other quarters, and they may decide not to let you go.”⁴⁷

The US, by not delivering on its end of the bargain, had effectively derailed a unique opportunity to engage seriously with Tehran toward rapprochement. This missed opportunity had not only strengthened the view in Tehran that the US was really interested in a constructive dialogue but also that it could not be trusted. The failure to produce reciprocity from the US for Iranian goodwill had also weakened—maybe not in terms of numbers, but influence—those in the Iranian government who advocated better relations with the US, particularly the camp led and represented by Rafsanjani.

Two Men, Two Views

Since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, two visions have dominated Iran’s consideration of relations with the United States. The two visions have some common features. They both reject US dominance of, and its interference in, Iran’s politics. They both support relations that would not threaten the *nezam*’s security and that are based on equality and mutual respect. They are also both opposed to the US policies of unconditional support for Israel which invariably results in a one-sided and humiliating approach toward the Islamic world in general and Iran in particular.

The Supreme Leader’s school of thought is extremely suspicious about the real intentions of the US toward Iran. He believes that paramount in US strategy is the objective of regime change, and that any conciliatory move by America’s leaders is designed to mislead the *nezam*, bringing the Americans closer to achieving that goal. The Supreme Leader contends that, “Any relations [with the US] would provide the possibility to the Americans to infiltrate Iran and would pave the way for their intelligence and spy agents.”⁴⁸ The concern is that official diplomatic relations would facilitate the creation of covert links between the US and those Iranians who were prepared to cooperate with the Americans to undermine the Iranian regime.

Rafsanjani's school of thought does not deny that the US holds hostile intentions toward Iran, but as a pragmatic centrist, he argues that there are sufficient common interests between Iran and the US that a fair deal through sustained dialogue is achievable. He knows from experience, as we have seen, that neither of the two countries will benefit from tit-for-tat policies, and that prudence dictates that these two enemies can and should, ultimately, become friends.

Both countries seek stability and security in the Persian region as the number one priority of Iran-US relations. Rafsanjani argues that this would not be achievable as long as the two remain hostile toward each other. He believes that Iran and the US have a common enemy in the extremists who fight both countries under the banner of Salafism, al-Qaeda terrorism. Iran has been in conflict with these forces since the 1990s, when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. Cooperation between Iran and America would be the most effective way to rebuff extremist Salafis that threaten the interests of both countries and the stability of the region as a whole. Hostility between Iran and the US only enables the extremists to challenge the security interests of both countries. If there is any chance of countering these destructive forces, it would manifest itself through close cooperation between Iran and the US.

More common ground between Iran and the US, in the eyes of Rafsanjani, is the economic benefit that both sides would reap if they normalized their relations. Rafsanjani was involved in various businesses prior to the revolution, thus he is a business-minded person who during his presidency pursued economic growth. He believes that hostile Iran-US relations present a serious obstacle to the development of Iran's economy, which is heavily dependent on foreign investment in its infrastructure, including the oil and gas industry. Rafsanjani views Iran as a tremendous opportunity for American investment. Indeed, in 1995, while he was president, he awarded a major oil contract to the US firm Conoco.

Disappointment Continues

Rafsanjani viewed economic cooperation as a potential means to revive dialogue and relations with the US. After the US refusal to reciprocate Iran's efforts in securing the release of Western hostages in Lebanon, it was extremely difficult for him to initiate another overture toward the US. However, Rafsanjani took made every effort to convince the SNSC and the Supreme Leader to examine a new path

of détente with the US through opening economic relations. Despite his profound pessimism and mistrust, the Supreme Leader agreed with Rafsanjani's argument for opening economic and technical relations with the US. To begin, Rafsanjani chose the energy sector, which was of significant interest to the Americans. To that end, Iran invited the US Conoco oil company, to tender for the development of the Sirri oil field project. At that time, the project was the largest oil field development in Iran's history. This would fit perfectly with President Clinton's new approach to foreign policy. Clinton asserted that with the end of the Cold War emphasis should be placed on economic rather than military instruments to advance foreign policy goals, such as the promotion of democracy, which he believed America had ignored.⁴⁹

Rafsanjani, with the approval of Ayatollah Khamenei, moved to sign the deal with Conoco with the added aim of significantly increasing Iran's economic relations with the US. As a result, Conoco was offered a billion-dollar contract to develop two offshore oil fields. Finally, in March 1995, Iran announced that a contract had been signed and thus an olive branch had been extended to the US.⁵⁰

The Clinton administration, however, not only failed to share the same perspective but also went against its own foreign policy which placed emphasis on economic relations. Shortly after Iran's announcement that a contract was signed with Conoco, the US government announced that it would obstruct the contract, calling it a "threat to national security."⁵¹ Clinton went further, signing an executive order that placed an embargo on US investment in Iran's energy sector. Foreign companies intent on developing Iran's energy sector were threatened with American sanctions, thus further deterring investment in the sector.⁵²

Clinton did not stop there. He signed another executive order banning any economic relations, including financial and commercial transactions, with Iran. The president accused Iran of seeking nuclear technology "in order to develop its capacity to build nuclear weapons."⁵³

Iran's olive branch was once again rejected, with Rafsanjani noting the missed opportunity for rapprochement: "This was a message to the United States which was not correctly understood," adding that his government had had to surmount "a lot of difficulty" to sign the deal with Conoco.⁵⁴

In a July 2 interview with CNN, Rafsanjani stated that the Conoco deal was aimed at demonstrating Iran's readiness to open economic and technical relations with the US. But he added that Americans "have

situated themselves within a framework of Zionist propaganda and hence their minds are poisoned with such propaganda and they are pulled by such propaganda to make decisions that are not wise.”⁵⁵ The role of Israel, its supporters, and its lobby in derailing Clinton’s foreign policy toward Iran is confirmed by many observers.^{56 57 58} In the same interview, Rafsanjani denied the Americans’ accusations that Iran was pursuing nuclear weaponization, saying, “We really hate the atomic bomb and its purpose ... Islam has prevented us from undertaking such adventurism.”

In my discussions with Rafsanjani, I vividly recall his frustration with Washington overturning the Conoco deal. He told me, “We had taken so many risks and overcame serious internal opposition to bring the establishment of commercial relations with Washington to the table, starting with the Conoco contract. We first had to get the SNSC to approve it and subsequently the Supreme Leaders’ approval.” Rafsanjani went on to describe the difficulties he faced in convincing the Supreme Leader to approve a resumption of commercial relations with the US. Ayatollah Khamenei had significant reservations and warned Rafsanjani not to trust the Americans. Rafsanjani did ultimately receive Ayatollah Khamenei’s approval.

The reaction from Washington was seen as a slap in the face, especially given Rafsanjani’s real motivation behind the Conoco deal. In his discussions with me he emphasized that, “We had the intention to begin economic relations with the US and as a major first step, we chose to show our commitment to rapprochement by allowing a major energy deal to proceed. We had hoped that this would lead to the beginning of wide ranging cooperation with the US on a political level.” Rafsanjani lamented, “I am so disappointed with the administration in Washington for blocking this deal. There is so much at stake!”

The US, under the influence of pro-Israel sentiments, was not interested in major rapprochement at the time. Washington proceeded to further punish Iran and signaled the start of sanctions directly on Iran’s major economic resource. On September 8, 1995, Senator Alfonse D’Amato introduced the Iran Foreign Oil Sanctions Bill to block the export of energy technology to Iran by foreign firms. Eventually reaching the statute book as the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), on December 18, 1995, the legislation now imposed sanctions on foreign investment in Iran’s energy sector.⁵⁹ According to this Act, the US would impose sanctions on foreign companies that invested more than \$20 million in Iran’s oil industry. A few days later, on December 31,

1995, Congress passed, as part of the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996, provisions which included \$18 to \$20 million to support covert operations against the Iranian government.⁶⁰

Overall, Ayatollah Khamenei remained unconvinced that cooperation with the US would ever occur since the US was not prepared to recognize Iran's role and interests as a major player in the region. There have been numerous occasions whereby Rafsanjani realized the significance of the normalization of relations between Iran and the United States. This was echoed in his letter to Iran's leader of the revolution. Raising the issue of relations with America by a high ranking official with Ayatollah Khomeini was totally without precedent. In an interview Rafsanjani says:

I wrote a letter to Imam [Khomeini] in the last years of his life. I even didn't type it. As I preferred no one read my letter, I gave it to Imam personally. I discussed about seven issues in the letter and I told him it was better to resolve those issues as long as he was alive, otherwise those issues might become a barrier against the country's development in the future. [I said] that if you don't help us remove them, it would be difficult to remove them after you [die] ... one of those issues was the relations with America. I wrote the style that we have adopted now, not to talk or have any relations with America is not sustainable ... Having relations doesn't mean that we submit to their will. We can negotiate, if they accept our positions, we accept theirs, that's it.⁶¹

In his interview with Arman newspaper in March 2014 Rafsanjani revealed interesting information with regard the mindset of Ayatollah Khomeini. He said that Ayatollah Khomeini disapproved of the slogan "Death to America,"⁶² especially on Iranian state radio and TV. Furthermore, Rafsanjani told me, "I was commander of armed forces. Imam told me that it is not right to walk over the US flag in the military parades. Then I ordered the armed forces to stop walking over the US flag in their parades."⁶³

In contrast to Ayatollah Khomeini's hostile stance against the United States during the Iran–Iraq War, there are numerous signs that he did not want relations to be severed permanently. Mohsen Rafqdoost, former Minister of the IRGC (later Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics), says that when he was appointed as the minister "in 1983 or 1984," he went to Ayatollah Khomeini's residence to get his permission to set up his office in the American Embassy. Ayatollah Khomeini replied, saying "Why do you want to go there?"

Are we going to be in conflict with America a thousand years? Don't go there.⁶⁴

Despite the differences in approach and policies toward the US, both schools of thought (as represented by Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khamenei) invariably believe that the relationship between Iran and the US should be one of non-intervention and mutual respect. It should also be noted that neither of the Ayatollahs were involved in the seizure of the American Embassy. It was not their will that the embassy should be invaded, an incident that marked the beginning of deadlock in Iran-US relations that still exists today.

For many, the real problem is the process of foreign policy decision-making in Iran. Many politicians, as well as analysts in the US, argue that no one, including the presidents, can shape Iran's foreign policy because the Supreme Leader is the ultimate decision-maker. In an interview before his election, President Rouhani presented an interesting argument. In response to a reporter who argued that as president, Rouhani would not be in a position to effect any changes to Iran's foreign policy, he asked him to explain the changes in foreign policy during different presidencies. "You say that the president and his government do not have any say in foreign policy and [only] the Supreme Leader does, but that is not true."⁶⁵ Rouhani highlighted the differences between the foreign policy of the governments of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad, and considered this to be clear evidence that Iran's presidents are influential in foreign policy decision-making despite the fact that the final say lies with Ayatollah Khamenei. Noting that "The leader was this leader [i.e. the same person during all three presidencies],"⁶⁶ then if presidents are a non-factor, how does one explain differing foreign policies from one president to the next? In the following section I will try to shed light on the process of foreign policy decision-making in Iran.

The Process of Foreign Policy Decision-Making

As in the US, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) is a major element in shaping security-related foreign policy, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of foreign relations and diplomacy and responsible to *Majlis*. Iran-US relations and the nuclear issue are two matters that fall within the remit of the SNSC. The council was established during the 1989 revision of the constitution, which defined its responsibilities as follows:

- Determining the defense and national security policies within the framework of general policies determined by the Supreme Leader;
- Coordination of activities in areas relating to politics, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic fields with regard to general defense and security policies; and
- Exploitation of material and intellectual resources of the country for facing internal and external threats.

The council is headed by Iran's president, who selects the secretary of the council. The decisions of the SNSC become enforceable with the Supreme Leader's approval. Membership of the council consists of the heads of the three branches of the government, the president, the speaker of parliament, the head of judiciary, chief of the supreme command council of the armed forces, chief commanders of the army and the IRGC, the head of budget and planning, the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Intelligence and Security, and two representatives of the Supreme Leader. Depending on the agenda, other ministers whose work might be impacted by discussions of the council may also participate in the meetings.

The process of foreign policy decision-making in Iran is very similar to the US. A foreign policy case may be raised within the council or by any other governmental institution, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or even the Supreme Leader's office. The case is then referred to the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC to research and prepare a report. The committee may interview other officials outside of the council, inside Iran or abroad, such as ambassadors. The subsequent report would outline different options and the pros and cons of each. Final reports are ultimately submitted to the secretary of the council and he determines whether more discussion within the SNSC is warranted, or whether it will be sent directly to the Supreme Leader's office. Even when reports are sent back to the SNSC, they are ultimately sent to the office of the Supreme Leader.

In some cases, upon receipt of an SNSC report, the Supreme Leader may call the members of the SNSC and sometimes even invite more people, including his advisors, for brainstorming on a case. Based on my experience as head of the Foreign Policy Committee at the SNSC, in the overwhelming majority of cases, Ayatollah Khamenei accedes to the proposals suggested by the council. Undoubtedly, like many countries, there is competition between factions within the government in order to impact the final

outcome of the process. This is similar to bureaucratic competition between departments in the United States' government intended to influence its foreign policy.⁶⁷

Because Rafsanjani was so influential in Iran's politics, the role of the SNSC was not so visible. During Mohammad Khatami's presidency, however, the SNSC acquired a much higher profile in steering foreign policy.

While Ayatollah Khamenei is indeed the one who makes final decisions on Iran's foreign policy, he too possesses the inescapable human trait of being influenced by others around him, particularly a president who has been elected by the majority of the voting populace, some millions of people. This also demonstrates why Iran was able to adopt a more moderate, tolerant foreign policy under Khatami as president. And it explains why, despite Ayatollah Khamenei's ultimate authority, Iran was seen as belligerent in foreign policy under Ahmadinejad's agenda.

Launching Dialogue with the West

As the head of Western European Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, during a visit to Dublin on May 17, 1990 I proposed dialogue on an array of issues with our European counterparts as a step toward resolving tensions with the West. At the time, Ireland held the presidency of the European Community (EC) Council, where I met with the general directors of the European troika, consisting of Ireland, France, and Italy. In the meeting, I voiced Tehran's readiness to do its utmost to facilitate the release of European hostages in Lebanon, while also proposing to establish an Iran–Europe dialogue to discuss the critical issues of both parties as a way to revive relations.⁶⁸ This meeting was the first such gathering since the revolution in 1979, and our European counterparts responded positively to my initiative on an Iran–Europe dialogue.⁶⁹ The *Times Daily* quoted the Irish officials as confirming talks focused on improving relations and the release of European hostages in Lebanon.⁷⁰

Based on this agreement with the EEC foreign ministers, "critical dialogue" would take place at a biannual gathering of Iranian and European officials at the level of deputy ministers of foreign affairs in various European capitals. These meetings continued until the end of President Rafsanjani's tenure in 1997, where my close colleague Mr. Vaezi represented Iran. Through this initiative, the foundation of an

Iran–Europe dialogue was established, while we continued to look for a way to open the door to Iran–US relations.

During the critical dialogue meetings with the Europeans, Iran proposed practical measures, such as joint working groups, to define concerns and the ways and means of cooperation. One such initiative included cooperation on curbing regional and international drug trafficking. The issue was of mutual interest as it affected both Iranians and European citizens. Other prominent areas considered were Iran's commitment to the success of the grand agenda on elimination of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in the region and the fight against terrorism. These were matters of great importance as they could contribute significantly to international peace and security, while addressing the main areas of dispute between Iran and the West and facilitating Iran's agenda for the formation of a regional cooperation system. However, these initiatives made little progress due to the US applying pressure on the Europeans to sever their relations with Iran.

Although this security package was discussed within the framework of the Iran–EEC critical dialogue, I placed great emphasis on having the Germans play a more prominent role in advancing the package. I believed that German cooperation on this initiative would accelerate the revival of Iran–West relations and serve as an avenue to US rapprochement.

While we were trying to engage our European counterparts on combating terrorism, on April 5, 1992, the MEK conducted a near-simultaneous attack on Iranian diplomatic missions in 13 countries, including the Iranian mission to the United Nations in New York.⁷¹ At that time, I was the Iranian ambassador to Germany and our embassy and consulates in Bonn, Hamburg, and Munich were attacked. In the aftermath of the attacks, the West did not provide any serious condemnation.

Iran's endeavor to improve cooperation with the West endured and we continued to press the Germans to take the lead on this initiative. However, constant obstacles were set up in an attempt to derail the initiative, and the Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry, Reinhard Schlagintweit, informed me on July 14, 1992 that the US had started to focus on WMD and the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, and due to positive developments in Iran–EU relations, Washington aimed to get a resolution passed by the upcoming G7 meeting to apply further measures against Iran. Even with this revelation and countless other obstacles, the Iranian government continued to provide ample opportunities for the West to improve relations with Iran.

One such overture was a meeting between the Iranian secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rouhani, and German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel on April 28, 1993. Rouhani expressed Tehran's readiness to lay a framework with Europe for cooperation on the WMDs issue. The initiative would entail acceptance of all international non-proliferation conventions, openness and transparency with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on nuclear issues, support of a WMD free zone in the Middle East, and the conversion of some military factories to civil production as a step towards demilitarization and durable peace in the Persian region. Rouhani made the same offer to Fritz Wittmann,⁷² Chairman of the Bundestag Defense Committee, and Bernd Schmidbauer, the Minister of State in the Chancellor's office, on April 29, 1993. However, Rouhani also conveyed that cooperation between Iran and the West on drug trafficking was probably the easiest and most achievable matter to begin with.

Tehran had invested tremendous political capital to engage with the West, but some proponents of rapprochement began to grow uncertain of the outcome. Another setback to our efforts came in my meeting with the Director General of the German Economics Ministry, Lorenz Schomerus, on May 3, 1993, when he informed me, "Your ideas on tackling WMD, terrorism, drug trafficking, and human rights could be very helpful to resolve Iran–West relations, but unfortunately the US does not buy the moderate and constructive offers Tehran raised in Bonn."

The Iranians placed great importance on this initiative. During high-level talks at various stages of the process they brought up their offer of Iran–West cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as the meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati and Chancellor Kohl on June 13, 1994 and a subsequent meeting with German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel. President Rafsanjani proposed the offer in his letter to Chancellor Kohl and even went on to say that Iran and Europe in cooperation could fight terrorism bilaterally, regionally, and internationally.

By this point, the EEC had transformed itself into the European Union (EU), but the EU could not advance the initiative since the US would not support it. Kinkel told Velayati that he agreed in principle with what Iran was proposing, but needed to figure out how it could be managed internationally. Ultimately our efforts proved to be in vain and in my discussion with the Political Director of the German Foreign Ministry, Hans-Wilhelm Theodor Wallau,⁷³ on October 24, 1994, Wallau informed me that Kinkel had reviewed the Iranian initiative with the

EU Commission and they had rejected it. The simple fact was that there was no chance of progress as long as Washington was opposed—and it became apparent to me that the Americans were fundamentally opposed to serious cooperation between Iran and Europe.

As far as Iran was concerned, the only explanation for the behavior of the United States was that they did not want Iran to act as a sovereign state capable of shaping its foreign policy independently, and did not want Europe to recognize Iran as such. Yet, if Washington had proceeded to play a more constructive role, Tehran was prepared to expand cooperation to include the US and make substantive progress on countering terrorism, halting the spread and production of WMD in the region, and curbing drug trafficking.

We also pursued another track in relation to building friendly relations with the West. As the most strategic region worldwide in terms of energy resources and their export, peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region was of vital concern to Iran, regional Arab countries, and the West. Therefore, a durable, regional, and cooperative system for peace, stability, and security in the Persian Gulf would not only secure the national interests of all parties involved but also significantly contribute to reducing tensions between Iran and the West, in particular the United States. That is why, once the Iran–Iraq War had ended, one of Tehran’s foreign policy goals was to create a workable framework of cooperation between Iran, the countries in the region, and the West.

In 1990, the restoration of relations with Europe was a firm commitment by the Supreme Leader, President Rafsanjani, and the SNSC. Rafsanjani first conveyed this strategy to me when he detailed my mandate as the Iranian ambassador to Germany, stating, “You have to realize our aim of better relations with Europe and the West is through the doorway of Germany followed by France.”

The day after I arrived in Bonn on October 9, 1990 as the first Iranian ambassador to a reunited Germany, I was received by the German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher. It was my understanding that the issue of Persian Gulf security could appeal to the US and the West. Therefore, if we could form a cooperative structure with Europe aimed at the security of the region, we might kill two birds with one stone. I decided that no time should be wasted. During my initial meeting with Genscher, I offered the German Foreign Minister the initiative of cooperation between Iran, our Arab neighbors, and Europe for security, stability, and peace in the Persian Gulf. Mr. Genscher was extremely enthusiastic and welcomed the proposed initiative. He authorized the

Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry Reinhard Schlagintweit⁷⁴ to continue the discussion on the details of the initiative with me. Schlagintweit was known to be supportive of fostering Iran–West relations—to such an extent that his nickname in political circles in Bonn was “Ayatollah Schlagintweit.” During a series of meetings, I discussed the following issues with Schlagintweit:

- A Regional Cooperation System with the participation of Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)⁷⁵ for security, stability, and peace in the Persian Gulf;
- Granting assurance to the international community for the safe transit of energy from the Persian Gulf through this Regional Cooperative;
- Cooperation of this regional organization with all countries having an interest in the security and stability of the Persian Gulf;
- Regional cooperation to also include the combating of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, and organized crime syndicates.

To build momentum and strengthen the initiative, Mr. Genscher arrived in Tehran on May 6, 1991 to meet with Rafsanjani and focus on the mechanisms to establish the system. President Rafsanjani gave his full backing to the initiative. Genscher was excited by Rafsanjani’s strong support for such an important policy that could guarantee a sustainable stability and peace in the region.

Following the meetings in Tehran, I arranged for Genscher to visit refugee camps in western Iran which housed Iraqi and Kuwaiti refugees from Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Germany was the only Western country that played a constructive role in assisting with the humanitarian crisis resulting from that conflict. During the visit, Genscher also met with the German aid workers in the area. Moreover, it is worthwhile mentioning that through major internal discussions and negotiations, the Iranian military establishment gave the green light for (for the first time since the 1979 Iranian revolution) a German military contingent to assist with the humanitarian efforts.

While traveling with Genscher in the plane from Tehran to Kermanshah (western Iran), I saw him gazing out of the window, for over twenty minutes. I approached and addressed him, startling him, and asked what held him in such deep thought. In response, Genscher confessed that he was contemplating “why a country with such a rich history, natural beauty, and strategic location—being at the heart of

the world with a skilled population—could not be on par with the developed nations?” I did not respond to his question, but rather asked for his own personal opinion, to which he replied jokingly, “If I tell you what I think, once we are off the plane, you would send the message to Tehran.” I assured him that I would not. He then elaborated:

I have been thinking of the reasons and I thought since Iran has an incredibly smart and educated population, it has to be the management of the country responsible for Iran’s slowed pace of development. However, after meeting with Rafsanjani for a few hours, I am baffled since, if not the most, he is one of the most competent and smart leaders I have ever met in the 16 years serving as a foreign minister of Germany ... Keep in mind I have met all important leaders of the East and West. So if it is not the people in charge of Iran’s management, then what? While I was thinking about it on the plane, I came to the conclusion that it is due to the level of tensions between Iran and the United States—these tensions need to be resolved.

I responded by saying that a starting point would be the initiative we had discussed with Rafsanjani on regional cooperation and issues related to terrorism, WMD, and drug trafficking. I also added that there were many other initiatives Iran was prepared to bring to the table. Genscher told me that he was enthusiastic about examining the initiative on Persian Gulf security and cooperation with Washington.

Genscher was known to spend his summer vacations in a castle in the Alps, during which time he would not receive any foreign delegates. I, however, was privileged to share a meeting with him during his vacation on August 5, 1991 to discuss the regional cooperation initiative. Mr. Genscher was clearly disappointed and frustrated to have to report that Washington would not support the initiative. I could not comprehend why that was the case.

Regardless of the pessimistic response I received from Mr. Genscher, for the next three years I strove to develop the initiative, as I was confident it would be in line with the common interests of all stakeholders, namely Iran, the US, the West, the region, and the international community. My predecessor, Mr. Javad Larijani,⁷⁶ the head of the Foreign Relation Committee of the SNSC of Iran who led the Iran–German Parliamentary Friendship Group, met with German

officials on January 18, 1994 to confirm Iran's willingness to develop cooperation with the EU/West for peace, stability, and security in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Persian Gulf. The proposal would require the construction of a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf to provide all the necessary international guarantees for security and peace, meeting the concerns of the West. In the meeting with German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel,⁷⁷ Larijani told him, "Iran had been working on the initiative for three years and the Supreme National Security Council of Iran (SNSC) has approved it. However, the US is preventing our Arab neighbors to come forward [sic]. Iran would welcome UN involvement to realize this initiative." While the Iran Foreign Minister Dr. Velayati had already showed Iran's willingness to forward the initiative, Mr. Kinkel regrettably advised that Washington did not welcome the initiative, as had been conveyed to him in his meeting with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

The Iranian regional cooperation initiative could have paved the way forward for increased stability and security in the region, but more importantly for Iranians, it would have been a monumental leap toward friendship with the West and obviously the United States. Yet once again, the US government blocked those efforts. I am confident that had that system of cooperation been established, we could live in a different world today.

Mediation at the Highest Level

In April 2011, a critical oral history conference was held in Musgrove, Florida. The participants were a group of American, American-Iranian, and Iranian scholars and former politicians, including Thomas Pickering and myself. The purpose of the conference was to contrast opposing views on "Haunted efforts to improve Iran-US relations" and delve into the issue of "Was it the United States or Iran who was responsible for missing the opportunities and bringing the relations between the two parties to a deadlock?" The conference was provocative, at times confrontational, the participants regularly interrupting the speakers to raise objections.

I asserted that Iran had made gesture after gesture in an effort to break through to the Americans, but that the US only responded with increased hostility. This was in contrast to the prevailing US view, that the Islamic Republic basically did not desire good relations with the

West, or at best, only wanted rapprochement on their own terms, which the West was not prepared to accept.

My American friends were stunned when they heard from me that contrary to common belief in the political arena in the United States, the best chance for reconciliation between Iran and the US was not presented under the reformist President Mohammad Khatami but during the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani. At the first session of the conference I revealed the German Chancellor's efforts to mediate between Iran and the US. I could see from the body language that most of the participants did not believe my story and that the rest also had doubts about its accuracy.

Bruce Riedel, a former senior member of the US National Security Council and advisor to four US presidents, told the participants just before the second session began that he found "Mousavian's entirely credible story" to be astounding. His astonishment was understandable, considering that my account was completely at variance with what he and the other Americans at the table believed at the time. Nevertheless, those Americans indicated that they were now beginning to see the other side of the conflict—through the eyes of Iranians.

I presented a summarized form of my dealings with the Germans to the members of the conference. One of my earliest meetings during my ambassadorship to Germany (1990–7), regarding German facilitation of a rapprochement between Iran and United States, was that with Minister of State Bernd Schmidbauer⁷⁸ on June 30, 1992. I asked Schmidbauer to confirm with the Americans whether they were serious about mending relations and if they agreed to Germany playing a mediating role. Schmidbauer promised to convey my message to Washington, and in the coming months, in close cooperation with German officials in the office of the Chancellor and the Foreign Ministry, we laid the foundations for German facilitation of Iran–US reconciliation to take shape.

Once I received the news of Chancellor Kohl's willingness to assist with Iran–US rapprochement, I informed Rafsanjani in a meeting on August 2, 1992, where he told me he would discuss the matter with Ayatollah Khamenei. A positive response from the Supreme Leader was essential to furthering this initiative. On August 22, 1992 President Rafsanjani informed me that he had discussed the role of Chancellor Kohl managing Iran–US relations with the Supreme Leader and while the Leader maintained his pessimism about American goodwill, he would not block the initiative. The main caveat was for Washington

to show goodwill in return for Iran's facilitation of the release of the Western hostages, the story described earlier.

As a first step toward improving relations, the US would need to release Iranian frozen assets, in the spirit of President George H. W. Bush's "goodwill for goodwill" reference. Subsequently, on August 27, 1992, in a meeting with Minister of State Bernd Schmidbauer, I was informed that the US president was looking to improve relations with Iran. Schmidbauer requested that the Iranians take proactive steps in this regard and said, "To go [on a] honeymoon with Europe while there are hostilities with the US would not be [productive]." We agreed to follow up the issue of improving relations between Tehran and Washington.

In order to discuss Tehran's position, expectations, and strategy to revive Iran-US relations, I met with Schmidbauer on September 9, 1992. I emphasized that Iran expected its frozen assets to be released in recognition of Iran's efforts to free the Western hostages, while Tehran would also embark on a plan to remove hostility and revive good relations by improving "nation to nation" links in the academic, economic, and tourism fields. During the same meeting, Mr. Schmidbauer informed me that Kohl had discussed his role as a facilitator with Washington and was told that due to the upcoming presidential election, the US would not be able to take any steps until that matter was out of the way.

The development of Bonn-Tehran relations had become a worrying point for Washington, an issue that Schmidbauer mentioned in our meeting at his home in Heidelberg on December 20, 1992. He further noted that during his meetings in Washington, the Americans had focused on two major issues: WMD and terrorism. In response, I proposed establishing a joint Iran-EEC working group to cooperate on combating terrorism and work on WMD non-proliferation. Meanwhile, I suggested that we could discuss issues of mutual concern, engage in dialogue to remove suspicions, and include the US in some later phases.

George H. W. Bush lost the election and President Bill Clinton was sworn in as the 42nd president of the United States on January 20, 1993. A month later, on February 10, 1993, President Rafsanjani sent a letter addressed to Chancellor Kohl and other European heads of state via Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi, announcing Iran's readiness to cooperate with the EEC on delicate issues such as WMD, terrorism, and human rights. While Rafsanjani criticized the West's double standards on these issues, he emphasized that *Iran's commitment would be based on international rules and norms.*

Subsequently, Chancellor Kohl visited Washington and held a number of meetings with officials, where he mentioned Iran's willingness to cooperate on these issues of WMD, terrorism, and human rights. I was astounded to learn from Mr. Schmidbauer on March 25, 1993, two months into Bill Clinton's presidency, that Washington was not ready to get involved with Iran's initiative, but instead was requesting that Kohl sever his ties with Tehran. Schmidbauer further advised me that the United States was mobilizing the international community against Iran on WMD, nuclear rights, and terrorism. Later on the same day, Mr. Schlagintweit,⁷⁹ Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry, confirmed the US position during a farewell ceremony for the Qatari ambassador to Germany. Schlagintweit informed me that while Chancellor Kohl was in the US, the White House had asked him to cut his ties with Iran. This had come against the backdrop of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's visit to Washington where, in a joint press conference on March 15, 1993, President Clinton stated that Israel and the US had reached a common strategic understanding on Iran.⁸⁰ I have to confess that at the time I found it difficult to comprehend the extent of the influence of Israel on US foreign policy.

The pressure was mounting from Washington on the Europeans—in particular the Germans—to dissolve ties with Tehran. Schmidbauer and I discussed this in a meeting on April 6, 1993, where he informed me that the dispute between the US and Germany over Iran was heating up, as the Germans believed in cooperation with Rafsanjani's government while the US wanted none of it. It was in this highly-charged atmosphere, on May 4, 1993, that I delivered Chancellor Kohl's response to President Rafsanjani's letter of February 10, 1993. The Chancellor's letter outlined Germany's support for Iran's proposal for regional cooperation, including the Persian Gulf states, while suggesting that Iran also raise the idea of Iran–EU cooperation in the Caspian Sea and in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO),⁸¹ with a guarantee of German backing. To strengthen Iran–EU relations, the Chancellor indicated that Germany was prepared to work with Iran in international organizations focused on issues relating to WMD non-proliferation, combating terrorism, and drug trafficking. The Chancellor's letter was the most positive message from a Western leader to an Iranian president since the 1979 Revolution.

Mohammad Hashemi Rafsanjani,⁸² the president's brother, delivered President Rafsanjani's response to Chancellor's Kohl's letter on September 10, 1993 in a meeting with Kohl. President Rafsanjani offered suggestions to end over two decades of animosity between Iran

and the West, especially the United States. Chancellor Kohl appreciated Rafsanjani's message and said that he would discuss it with President Clinton, emphasizing that isolation of Iran would not assist peace, security, and stability in the region. He also praised Iran as a great country with an important role in the region, a point that he had made to President Clinton on more than one occasion, according to him. On his role as a mediator for better relations between Iran and the US, Kohl stated: "I would talk with President Clinton again with great interest. I am neither your nor the Americans' representative or attorney, but I would convey the message to Washington and the European heads of state. I have told Washington very clearly that tensions in Iran-US relations should be reduced. While Iran is ready, why should not the Americans be as well?" I also conveyed a message to Bonn from President Rafsanjani, which stated that Tehran had not extended an official mandate for Chancellor Kohl to mediate on their behalf, but that Iran would cooperate and advance its own initiative to improve relations.

To further develop Iran's readiness for full cooperation on WMD, terrorism, and rapprochement with the US, I held a meeting with Dr. Rudolf Dolzer,⁸³ Director General of the Office of the Chancellor, on December 2, 1993. By that time, the European Union (EU) had officially come into existence. He told me that he had discussed the package with Martin Indyk⁸⁴ in the White House, and that Indyk had been stunned at the level of cooperation Iran had offered and did not know how to respond. I told him that if the White House was receptive, Chancellor Kohl would be ready to finalize a practical framework to bring President Rafsanjani and President Clinton together. I also raised the likelihood of resolving the Salman Rushdie⁸⁵ problem through a commitment to respect international norms and not interfere in the internal affairs of the United Kingdom (UK).

In a follow-up discussion with Dr. Dolzer on December 6, 1993, he offered his explanation for America's unwillingness to cooperate with Germany to resolve Iran-US tensions. He cited Iran's non-recognition of Israel as the main obstacle to US to engagement Iran as a step towards rapprochement. I was surprised by such a gross double standard. Of over 50 members of the Organization of Islamic Conference, only a handful recognized Israel. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, considered to be US allies, had not (and still have not in 2014) recognized Israel. How could that be an obstacle to reconciliation with Tehran? Subsequently, in a meeting with Dr. Dolzer on December 17, 1993, he told me that Washington informed Bonn that Tehran could raise any issue related to

bilateral relations through the Swiss ambassador in Tehran—in essence, a diplomatic way to tell the Germans mind their own business. I told Dr. Dolzer that this clearly meant that Washington had rejected Kohl's mediation and that the Americans were not serious about resolving their dispute with Iran, since there was no comparison between the political status and capacity of Chancellor Kohl and that of the Swiss ambassador in relation to managing such a complicated, troubled relationship. Dr. Dolzer agreed with this assessment, and was extremely angry about Washington's response. In the end, Ayatollah Khamenei's pessimism about the German Chancellor's mediation initiative was well warranted.

Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Velayati met with Chancellor Kohl on June 13, 1994, where he reiterated Iran's willingness to cooperate in the international arena on the issues of terrorism, WMD, and drug trafficking. He also voiced Tehran's frustration with US attempts to isolate Iran despite the constructive policies it had presented. In response, Chancellor Kohl reaffirmed his commitment to improving Iran–West relations:

My strategy is not based on isolating Iran; rather I support engagement between Iran and the international community. I believe Iran–West common cooperation on combating terrorism, WMD, and drug trafficking is the right approach and I would continue to support this initiative, despite criticism from the US and even some EU officials. I will visit Washington within a month and talk with the US president on these issues again in order to use such opportunities in opening the door on cooperation with Iran. We have enough tensions worldwide. We do not need another major crisis.

We did not hear about the outcome of Kohl's visit to Washington, until in my meeting with German Minister of State Bernd Schmidbauer, on June 23, 1994, I was informed that during a recent visit to Bonn by President Clinton, the Chancellor had discussed the necessity of removing tensions with Tehran and improving relations. However, Clinton had repeated the necessity for Bonn to limit its relations with Tehran, and asserted that Bonn had fallen out of line with NATO and the West by improving relations with Tehran.

During my mission in Germany (1990–7), the European Union was under constant pressure from the US–Israeli position against Iran. It was clear to me that more German efforts on Iran–US rapprochement simply produced more pressure from Washington on Bonn and the EU

to limit their relations with Iran. Finally, in a meeting on December 9, 1994, Dr. Dolzer stated that the EU would not be able to go forward with what had been discussed between Bonn and Tehran. In a later meeting, on April 2, 1995, he added that, "In the past two months I have made three visits to US, but we have not been able to convince them. The US is in favor of mounting economic sanctions and international pressure." The following month, on May 1, 1995, President Clinton announced new sanctions against Iran⁸⁶ during a speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).⁸⁷

In a December 1995 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Charles Lane, then the lead editor at *New Republic*, clarified the dispute between the Germans and the Americans on how best to approach relations with Iran:

The U.S. and German governments have worked together on aid to Russia, NATO expansion, nuclear nonproliferation, and Middle East peace. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and U.S. President Bill Clinton enjoy a natural rapport. But when it comes to dealing with Iran, Germany and America have consistently been at odds. Although the two governments have assured each other that their objectives in southwest Asia are the same—to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, supporting terrorism, and disrupting the Arab-Israeli peace process—they differ radically on which means to use. The United States has tried to isolate Iran diplomatically and strangle its economy—[while] Germany and Europe favor engagement.

When President Clinton banned U.S. trade with, and investment in, the Islamic Republic in May, he was trying not only to punish the mullahs, but also to undercut the European policy, especially that of Germany ... But even after Clinton's imposition of the embargo, Western Europe and Japan stood pat. "We do not believe that a trade embargo is the appropriate instrument for influencing opinion in Iran and bringing about changes there that are in our interests," said German Economics Minister Günter Rexrodt.⁸⁸

At Christmas 1995, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rouhani, arrived in Germany to receive medical treatment. We spent a week together, which I found was a great opportunity to discuss the current strategy. I explained that the "West Minus US" approach was bound to fail and that eventually the Europeans would give up. My theory was that in the absence of direct negotiations with

the US to improve relations, Washington would become entrenched in hostility and ultimately determined on regime change. Subsequently, as relations between Iran and the US deteriorated and pressure mounted, a time would come when the Europeans would have to choose between Iran and the US. In that eventuality, they would undoubtedly side with the US. Ultimately, I believed that all efforts to build better relations with the EU would fail and result in a united Western bloc against Iran. Such a situation would lead to a possible confrontation between Iran and the West.

Convinced, Rouhani asked me to elaborate on my position in Tehran. On my subsequent return, I initially discussed my views with the Deputy Foreign Minister for US and European Affairs, Mahmoud Vaezi and the Director General for Western European Affairs, Ali Ahani.⁸⁹ Coincidentally, the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, Kamal Kharazi,⁹⁰ was in Tehran at the time, and I had a chance to discuss these matters with him and Deputy Minister on International Affairs Javad Zarif. They also agreed with my assessment. On January 1, 1996, I had the opportunity to present my analysis to Foreign Minister Velayati. I stressed that the Foreign Ministry should make it clear to the high authorities in Iran that Europe would not be able to indefinitely resist US pressures and would eventually give in. Following my discussion, Velayati held a meeting with the Foreign Relation Committee of the parliament, reiterating my view that if the European Union reached a point where it had to choose between Iran or the US, it would obviously side with the latter, resulting in a united Western coalition against Iran.

I also presented my stance to President Rafsanjani on January 2, 1996, after which he was wholly convinced and supportive of my theory. The following week, on January 8, I attended a meeting of the SNSC, at Dr. Rouhani's behest, to explain my analysis on the "West minus US" strategy. On January 13, the SNSC for the first time approved direct dialogue between Iranian MPs and US Congressmen and Senators.

During a seminar in Bonn on "Culture, Trade and Foreign Policy," on January 15, German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, confided to me, "Before, the Americans were angry with us on expanding relations with Tehran, but nowadays they have become mad." I asked whether Europe would be able to resist, to which he responded negatively. Nevertheless, on January 17, I informed Professor Dolzer that Tehran was ready to start direct talks between Iranian parliamentarians and members of the American Congress. This was an unprecedented step that might end years of enmity and suspicion between the two countries, but could also have a significant domestic

impact in terms of moderating the policy of Washington and Tehran. Two weeks later, to my regret, Dr. Dolzer informed me that the Americans refused to respond to this outreach. We could not be certain what the rationale behind America's position was, but on the surface the US seemed to be pursuing only one goal—that of bringing down the Iranian system.

Mykonos and Beyond

Two major terrorist attacks significantly impacted relations between Iran and West. Here, I would like to offer my analysis on these events.

From 1990 to 1992, bilateral relations between Bonn and Tehran expanded exponentially. During this period, more than half of cabinet members from both countries exchanged visits, joint economic and cultural commissions were established, and both heads of state were regularly in contact to discuss regional and international issues.⁹¹ These exceptional developments had not been seen in the relations between Iran and any Western country since the Islamic Revolution.

The improved relations with Germany and France soon transcended borders and contributed to better overall relations with Europe, with countries beginning to expand their ties with Tehran. It was against this backdrop that the assassination of the Shah's last prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, in Paris, and the Mykonos terrorist attacks in Berlin occurred.

I was serving as the Iranian ambassador to Germany at the time of the Mykonos assassinations. On September 17, 1992, three Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders and their translator were assassinated by gunmen who attacked the Greek restaurant Mykonos in Berlin. Upon hearing the news of the assassination from my colleagues the next day, while the embassy compound was surrounded by German police, I was in disbelief and knew it would have a detrimental effect on Iranian-German relations. I sought more information from the German authorities, who informed me that at that point they were not sure who was responsible. Shortly after the incident, I left for Tehran to meet with officials there, including the Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, who assured me that that Iran had not been involved and that he would send his deputy, Saeed Emami, to fully cooperate with the German authorities. Furthermore, if any evidence implicated Iran, it would be thoroughly investigated in full cooperation with the Germans. Saeed Emami, according to Mohammad Niazi, Head of the Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces, "was one of the main and

central elements” of a rogue cell within the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) who a few years later was arrested on charges of disappearance and murder of several intellectual dissidents.⁹²

Emami duly arrived in Bonn, where he held closed-door meetings with the most senior German security officials. Security officials from both countries requested that I did not attend the meetings. I learned later from a German source that Emami’s position at the meeting had been that Iran was not involved in the killings. My informant revealed that Tehran’s position was that a third party had been involved and assured the Germans that once any evidence materialized, Iran would cooperate in finding the culprits—and if necessary, conduct its own investigation to remove any suspicion of Iranian involvement.

I penned a letter to the judge in charge of the Mykonos undertaking to do whatever was in my power to assist with the investigation. For the next four years (1992–6), I followed up on this issue in my meetings with German officials to get to the root of it. They repeatedly reassured me that this was not a political issue and that the German judiciary would act independently. Despite my efforts, however, relations between Iran and Germany began to deteriorate, though they were strong enough for Bonn to obstruct the issuing of a subpoena by the judiciary to bring Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian to court.⁹³ A new episode, however, suddenly aggravated the already tense situation.

In March 1996, the Iranian vessel *Kolahdooz*, with a cargo destined for Munich, was impounded in Antwerp, and a consignment of powerful mortars discovered. Germany would subsequently claim that Iran had attempted to smuggle arms into NATO territory. “This time we are talking about a security threat to NATO,” a German official told me.

Belgium announced that mortar shells were discovered in a food container, bound for Munich, Germany, on a ship from Iran, and directed this information to the German government’s attention. As Iran’s ambassador to Germany, I was responsible for monitoring the case on Iran’s behalf. I could scarcely believe my ears when a high-ranking German official informed me that the source of this intelligence had been the United States, relayed to NATO and the Belgian government in Brussels, which is also home to NATO headquarters. Based on the intelligence passed to the German government, they impounded the ship upon its arrival in Hamburg. During inspection of the ship’s cargo, the consignment detailed by American intelligence down to the container and crate number were removed from the vessel. The German official with whom I spoke said, “Americans even knew

the name of the individual that transferred it to the ship back in [the Iranian port of] Bandar Abbas, and provided the information to the German Government. We have a great respect for you. That's why we would not expel you from Germany. However until this case is cleared, you should play volleyball with your wife at your residence because no official would be able to receive you."

Following this incident, I immediately went to Tehran to meet with President Rafsanjani. He was surprised to see such an incident reported by the Western media and told me that he had inquired of the Supreme National Security Council as to whether they had any knowledge of the matter. Neither Iranian intelligence, nor security officials had been made aware of it, and the president said that Ayatollah Khamenei had ordered a full investigation to be carried out. President Rafsanjani requested the German government to provide any information they had on the matter so that Iran's government could investigate within its own borders. The president emphasized that this incident was critical to Iran's national security.

Only days after the incident, the MEK's newsletter published photographs and specifics about the alleged contraband, begging the question as to how was it possible that a consignment of mortar shells could be discovered on an Iranian government vessel without the knowledge of Iran's president, but with the details known to the United States government and the MEK.

This incident came few days prior to an international anti-terrorism conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, attended by German Chancellor Kohl. Following the conference, the German government decided to lift its restrictions on the investigation of the Mykonos assassinations and subsequently issued a subpoena on the Iranian Minister of Intelligence.⁹⁴ The timing of the *Kolahdooz* affair seemed to be perfect in terms of worsening the already troubled relations between Iran and Germany following the Mykonos murders.

The German prosecutor's reasoning and the judge's justification for the subpoena related to the testimony of "Witness C," who alleged that the Iranian "special committee, of which the Iranian Supreme Leader, president, minister of foreign affairs and intelligence were members ... had given the order for the Mykonos murders."⁹⁵ "Witness C" was Mr. Abdolghassem Mesbahi, an indebted Iranian businessman who had fled Iran and, in an effort to secure asylum in Europe, convinced French intelligence agents that he had valuable intelligence on the Mykonos assassination. His subsequent debriefing by Western intelligence agencies eventually brought him to the German court, where

his sensational entrance shielded by security personnel added to the mystery surrounding the case.

In court, the man responsible for validating Mesbahi's statements was Abulhassan Banisadr, first president of the Islamic Republic (February 1980 to June 1981) who had quickly fallen out of favor with the Iranian leadership and fled to Paris, never to return to Iran. Though Banisadr no longer had day-to-day experience of Iranian affairs, his validation of Mesbahi's testimony and the political nature of the case eventually led the judge to consider his testimony credible.⁹⁶

One month after the trial, Mesbahi wrote to the leading German daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which published the letter in which he refuted all the allegations made in his testimony, claiming that he had been promised a residency permit and financial support in return for his "evidence."⁹⁷ Similarly, the second witness in the court testimony, "Witness B," also refuted his confession about Iran's involvement.⁹⁸ The damage, however, had been done.

Following the Mykonos assassinations court verdict in April 1997, in which the Iranian government was judged to have "inspired, supported, and supervised" the terrorist act, Iran–German relations spiraled downward, and the years of concerted effort to strengthen relations were reversed. As a result, both countries recalled their ambassadors, ministerial-level cooperation was halted, the expulsion of diplomats by both sides was begun, the leading German firm Euler Hermes suspended insurance credit, and "critical dialogue" on various issues involving Iran and Europe was suspended. The other European countries followed suit. Every member of the EU recalled its ambassador and, in a retaliatory move, Iran withdrew its ambassadors from all EU countries.⁹⁹ Relations with Europe deteriorated, leaving Iran feeling detached from the developed world. This was not what the government of Iran had sought.

The Supreme Leader, the president, and the SNSC had all been committed to the restoration of good relations with Europe, so it does not take a detective to deduce that the terrorist activities in Europe could not have been orchestrated by prominent Iranian politicians in charge. It would have been incomprehensible for Tehran, relentlessly pursuing an improvement in relations with the West under Rafsanjani, to jeopardize such important foreign policy objectives by seemingly mindless actions. While I was Iran's ambassador to Germany, I asked Schmidtbauer the following question: "How can one reconcile Iran's dedication to expanding relations with Germany with this terrorist act?"

This argument had initially discouraged the Germans from issuing a subpoena on Iranian officials. But the Antwerp case turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Chapter 5

THE RISE OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT IN IRAN 1997–2005

Mohammad Khatami emerged as Iran's first reformist president in the 1997 elections. His slogan during the campaign was "Freedom, Civil Society, and *Ghanoon Madaari*" (rule of law). With a crashing victory over the traditional right, Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, the government's left faction, returned to power for the first time since their exit in 1988. But during the eight years leading up to this victory, the left had evolved. They no longer insisted on economic justice. Their focus was on political and, to a lesser extent, social liberties. Their vision coincided with Khatami's, a reformist who believed in a tolerant interpretation of Islam which conflicted with the right's traditional interpretation.

On May 23, 1997, Khatami was elected with approximately 70 percent of the votes in an election that had an 80 percent turnout. This marked the genesis of the Iranian reform movement, also known as the "2nd of Khordad" movement, referring to the Iranian calendar's date on which Khatami secured his victory. Intellectuals, students, artists, and young middle- and upper-class urbanites fiercely supported Khatami. Political parties and organizations that supported Khatami's reform plans demanded changes aimed at greater freedom and democracy.

Interestingly, and as customary, the United States grossly misunderstood Iran's politics. In a Congressional hearing just before Iran's presidential election, a top US Middle East expert, David Welch, presented this analysis:

Iran's revolution continues to evolve. Periodically there are internal voices that are raised which criticize the regime's policies ... Unfortunately, those voices are not being given a serious opportunity for expression in next month's Presidential election in Iran. The candidates in that election share a common investment in the status quo and Iran's unacceptable policies.¹

He later asserted that, "We do not subscribe to the theory that there are emerging Iranian moderates. We do not subscribe to it today. We have not before." Richard Cottam, internationally recognized as an expert on Iran, had predicted the emergence of a very conservative figure, and the administration had informed the Congress just before the elections that it did not subscribe to the theory of emerging Iranian moderates.² Americans then watched with surprise the victory of a candidate who would later introduce the idea of a "Dialogue among Civilizations" in response to Samuel Huntington's influential "Clash of Civilizations."

In addition to Welch's analysis, not a single report or analysis of American think tanks, or even a columnist writing for credible American newspapers, saw the reform movement approaching. The United States' chronic problem of misreading Iran manifested itself once again.

After completing my mission in Germany in 1997, I returned to Tehran and decided to abandon the world of politics altogether. Events during my ambassadorship in Germany had worn me down. Every effort I had made to normalize the relations between Iran and Europe had been nullified by destructive events such as terrorist actions (regardless of which individual or country was responsible). At the end I felt that, as we say in Farsi, my efforts were nothing but "pestling water in a mortar [which can never be ground or crushed]." I set a new goal for myself: I would first study politics (my first degree was a B.Sc. in mechanical engineering) and then involve myself in research, writing, and teaching. So I entered the University of Tehran and took a Masters course in International Relations.

Soon thereafter, the ever dynamic Dr. Hassan Rouhani, then secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, called and asked me to meet with him. Rouhani is a Shia Mujtahid cleric (i.e. an Islamic scholar who is competent to interpret sharia), a mixture of modernity and tradition, having one leg in the principlists' camp and another in that of the reformists, a graduate of the Qom Seminary (regarded as the premier seminary in Iran), and a Ph.D. graduate of the Glasgow Caledonian University. Rouhani is an extremely smart moderate, and in addition to other high-ranking positions, he headed Iran's SNSC between 1989 and 2005.

My relationship with Rouhani dates back to 1983 when I was head of the parliament's administration and he was Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the parliament and deputy to Rafsanjani in command of the war against Iraq. Rouhani founded a group of

MPs called “The Wise” or “The Prudents” to promote pragmatism in domestic and foreign policy, an objective I totally concurred with. Thirty years later, when he won the presidential election of 2013, he named his administration “Prudence and Hope.”

During our meeting, he proposed that I should as his deputy head the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC. I informed him of my decision to leave politics and the reasons why. I failed to convince him that my decision was a good one and he insisted that I should accept the job because of my extensive background in foreign relations. I told him that I would accept the job, but only temporarily until such time that he could identify and recruit another candidate.

He acquiesced, but there never turned out to be another candidate. I remained in that position for the next eight years, while also being a member and the spokesman of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team from 1997 to 2005.

In this period I played a major role to establish a new party called *Hezbe Etedal va Tosèeh*, or “Moderation and Development Party” led by Rouhani. The origin of Rouhani’s school of thought, “moderation,” dates back to the early years of Khatami’s presidency in the late nineties. Organized factionalism had begun to emerge within the establishment prompting Rafsanjani to voice his concern. He espoused that the emergence of factional infighting would internally weaken the *nezam*, ultimately threatening its stability. Rafsanjani urged members of both camps, i.e., the Reformists and the Principlists, to unite and shape a new front under the banner of “Moderates.” Pursuant to Rafsanjani’s call, then-Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi (Minister of Communication in 2014), Member of Parliament Mohammad Bagher Nobakht (Vice President and the Head of Budget and Policy Planning of Iran on 2014), Deputy Cultural Minister Ali Jannati (Minister of Culture in 2014) and I met with Rafsanjani to realize the initiative. Rafsanjani told us during that meeting, “Ruling the country with one faction would be a disaster and instead, all moderates within both major factions should unite and advance economic-political development to strengthen the pillars of the Islamic Republic.” That meeting resulted in the birth of the *Hezbe Etedal va Tosèeh*, or “Moderation and Development Party.” Rafsanjani endorsed Rouhani as the best candidate and in 1999, Rouhani chaired the party and its central committee, aiming for political moderation and economic development. During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the Moderation and Development Party faced immense pressure from the opposite camp but it rose from ashes again with the emergence of Rouhani as Iran’s President.

Meanwhile, I continued my doctoral studies at the University of Kent in the UK, graduating in 2002. It was the beginning of a new era in my life, but one that would later end under enormous stress and exasperation.

The Europeans Come Back

Following the Mykonos assassinations court verdict in April 1997, Iran and the EU countries recalled their ambassadors, to all intents and purposes bringing diplomatic relations between Iran and the Western countries to a complete halt. Two months later, Khatami won the election. His platform of liberalization and reform immediately raised debate and consideration by European countries about restoring their relations with Iran. We heard of this through their embassies' contact with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The SNSC discussed the new development and finally decided that Iran should respond positively before differences deepened.

The case was taken to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and he agreed, but on one condition: the German ambassador should be the last one to return to Iran. The Supreme Leader's single condition was conveyed to the Europeans, but they rejected it outright. Six months of deliberation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Europeans ensued before an acceptable solution was found: the German and French ambassadors would be the last ambassadors to return and both would come to Tehran aboard the same plane. With this arrangement, Iran's condition was fulfilled, while the Europeans had not completely acquiesced with Ayatollah Khamenei's demand, which had been perceived as humiliating to the Europeans.

In the eyes of an outsider, the whole scenario might appear childish, but behind the scenes, the history of relations between Iran and the West, especially the United States, is full of similar episodes. Actions and words may sound irrational and immature, but this is how both sides sought to protect their status and system of values.

Does this prove the validity of Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations?"³ Frankly, I do not think so. Despite the differences between a faction of society in Iran and their government, what the Iranians as a whole seek is international recognition of their right to live as an independent state. This vision and sentiment of independence is woven into Iranian culture, and its nature is more nationalistic than religious, although the dominant discourse in Iran portrays the contrary. Mohammad

Mossadegh, the nationalist prime minister in the 1950s, was not a cleric and was not driven by religious emotions and beliefs. He hailed from an aristocratic family, had graduated from Western universities, wore ties, and was a true modernist. But Mossadegh and the popular movement that he led also rebelled against foreign domination. He wanted the country's independence, and the West punished him with a coup.

Ayatollah Khamenei, by imposing the condition that the German ambassador arrive last of all of Europe's ambassadors, aimed to establish that the West could not dictate and arbitrarily change the rules of the game without regard for Iranian pride. Conversely, Europe was determined not to let him impose his will on the powerful West. It is a struggle that still persists.

Khatami Proposes Dialogue

Khatami was a scholar and a political thinker who believed in a tolerant interpretation of Islam, as opposed to the hard-line and traditional interpretation. His priority, as far as foreign policy was concerned, was to seek better relations with the West, but based on mutual respect and interest. Khatami did not want an unbalanced and disrespectful relationship, a relationship in which, as we say in Farsi, the West would talk to Iran from a superior position. This sentiment has persisted as a great obstacle in the relations between Iran and the West, and to a greater extent, between Iran and the US, regardless of which Iranian president with what tendency has been in power. They have all coveted a balanced relationship and rejected a patron–client relationship.

In my first meeting in 1997 as the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC, Khatami told me:

I am glad that you accepted to lead the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC. I need your help advancing a moderate foreign policy. My first idea was to have you as the second man of the Foreign Ministry. But I doubted whether my reformist friends, now nominated as deputy foreign ministers, would cooperate with you. We are now faced with the same problem encountered by Rafsanjani. The Supreme Leader wants America to be excluded from the agenda of direct negotiations with the West aimed at establishing friendly relations.

Due to his mistrust toward America the Supreme Leader argues that we should first see clear signs of change in America's hostile policies before outstretching our hands toward the Americans. In his eyes, seeking reconciliation with the US before ensuring that their enmity has changed to a real desire for a mutual, respectful relationship, would ultimately end in Iran's humiliation and would be interpreted as our weakness and our fear of the Americans. He also maintains that as we have repeatedly experienced when Americans come forward, they always hide a dagger behind them. Although I believe the US should change its behavior and show its goodwill by actions rather than words, I prefer to convey our opinion and intention of seeking friendly relations to the American people rather than using rhetoric. In this respect I am confident having you as deputy to Dr. Rouhani, we would be able to improve our foreign relations with all countries including the West and hopefully the US.

Khatami, not as pessimistic as the Supreme Leader, argued that in order to improve relations with the US, we should first crack the thick wall of mistrust that had been built between Iran and the US. He took a bold step to achieve this. A few months after his election, Khatami held his historic interview with Christiane Amanpour from CNN.

In this interview, he skillfully presented his views and the trajectory that he intended to follow in his foreign policy:

I respect the American nation because of their great civilization. This respect is due to two reasons: the essence and pillars of the Anglo-American civilization and [to facilitate] the dialogue among the civilizations ... We feel that what we seek is what the founders of the American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago. This is why we sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of the American civilization.⁴

But Khatami was concerned about the new thesis of the "Clash of Civilizations," which had become popular in the US political arena. In Iran, it was widely thought that this thesis could potentially give rise to conflict between the Islamic world and the West. In his interview with CNN,⁵ Khatami dealt with the issue:

One of the major flaws in the US foreign policy ... is that they continue to live with [a] cold war mentality and try to create a perceived enemy ... After the collapse of communism, there has

been an attempt by certain circles to portray Islam as the new enemy, and regrettably they are targeting progressive Islam rather than certain regressive interpretations of Islam.

It is true that Huntington, as one of the principal proponents of this school of thought, did not argue that conflict between Islam and the West was inevitable, but there were elements in his theory that could be misinterpreted or misunderstood, thus justifying a conflict between the two civilizations.

Huntington argued that “Islam’s borders are bloody”⁶ and warned that “the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity” will dwarf the “conflict between liberal democracy and Marxism-Leninism.”⁷ In addition, in a striking generalization, he asserted that “the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism, it is Islam...”⁸ This was a controversial assertion which made little distinction between Khatami’s interpretation of Islam and Bin Laden’s.

That said, less attention was paid to that part of Huntington’s theory regarding universalism: “Western belief in the universality of Western culture ... is false ... and it is dangerous. That it is false has been the central thesis of this book.”⁹ Huntington’s argument against the “West” attempting to force its values on the “rest” is realistic and valuable. Specifically, with respect to Muslim countries, what the “West” sees as modernity is often at variance with many Muslims’ views. Surprisingly, Huntington’s stand against the West’s struggle for cultural hegemony and his non-interventionist analysis on universalism is seldom referred to in Iran.

Khatami’s plausible fear was that a *deterministic interpretation* of Huntington’s theory, regarding a clash between Islam and the “West” being inevitable, could inadvertently spark the West’s fear and hatred of Islam. Meanwhile, the same deterministic interpretation could be used to justify the violent actions of Islamic extremists against the “West” in Muslim societies. When it came to Iran, the real danger was that policy-makers in the West, led by America, would take the inevitability of a clash theory to heart, abandon any efforts at reconciliation with Iran, and instead adopt an inflexible, hostile position. This would only strengthen radicalism in Iran, which was fiercely opposed to any rapprochement with the US. In fact, the emergence of new conservatives in 2005, represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was primarily a reaction to George Bush’s treatment of Iran.

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Bernard Lewis, the British-American thinker who coined the concept and the term

“clash of civilizations,” was invited to the White House to brief the administration on “Why Muslims hate us.”¹⁰ Lewis’s explanation of the “clash of civilizations,” that is, unavoidable conflict between two mutually exclusive worldviews, was clearly reflected in the new discourse that President George W. Bush adopted towards Iran. By including Iran in the axis of evil, the president transformed the conflict between the US and Iran into a clash between good and evil, which logically could only end with the annihilation of one side by the other.

Because of Ayatollah Khamenei’s deep mistrust of the US, and thus his objection to the normalization of relations with the Americans, Khatami sought to normalize Iran’s relations with the US through his newly developed thesis of “dialogue among civilizations.” In his interview with Amanpour he expanded on the idea:

... nothing should prevent dialogue and understanding between two nations ... right now, I recommend the exchange of professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists, and tourists. But the dialogue between civilizations and nations is different from political relations. There is a bulky wall of mistrust between us and the US Administration ... there must first be a crack in this wall of mistrust to prepare for a change ...

The following pages describe how a combination of complex activities and plans by forces who fiercely opposed the normalization of relations between Iran and the US, profound mutual mistrust between the two states, the uncompromising and hostile policies of the US toward Khatami’s reformist government, and misperceptions of the policy-makers of Iran and the United States caused the defeat of Khatami’s project.

Clinton seeks Reconciliation but Confuses

Between 1997 and 2000, when Khatami and Clinton were both in office, the US pursued a push and pull policy, with offers of reconciliation followed shortly thereafter by hostile postures. Iran did not understand this approach and found it exceedingly confusing.

The 1996 Khobar bombings in Saudi Arabia, which happened during the presidency of Rafsanjani, had a detrimental effect on the détente policies that Rafsanjani and Khatami pursued. America’s

blaming of Iran for this episode, which seemed to follow a familiar pattern the eyes of Tehran, bolstered the claim of hardliners that the West was only interested in pursuing regime change. On the US side, a terrorist attack that had resulted in the death of 19 Americans and wounded hundreds could not be taken lightly.

US policy towards Iran was effectively taken hostage by the Khobar bombings. This event was one major reason that a unique opportunity to end the atmosphere of hostility—the concurrent presidencies of Clinton, who sought to open the door to Iran–US relations, and Khatami, who came to power with an agenda to ease tensions between the two states—was missed.

In April 1999, Bill Clinton stunned us. At an event in the White House, he admitted that Iran, “has been the subject of quite a lot of abuse from various Western nations.” He continued, “I think sometimes it’s quite important to tell people, ‘Look, you have a right to be angry at something my country or my culture or others that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago.’”¹¹ This sounded like an apology and raised hope in Khatami’s moderate administration of a genuine effort by the Clinton administration to improve relations.

Rouhani agreed with me that a comprehensive package aimed at removing the tension and hostility between Iran and the US be developed in the Foreign Relations Committee of SNSC. In my capacity as head of the committee of the SNSC, I organized a series of discussions on Iran–US relations that culminated in the details of the package.

The package covered the spheres of civilian diplomacy such as culture, science, tourism, academia, and the economy, and made provision for a US interest section in Tehran, similar to the Iranian interest section in Washington, DC. Moreover, the package included a political component that would pave the way for parliamentary-level dialogue between the US and Iran. This unprecedented set of proposals would mark a significant move towards transforming relations between Iran and the US. The package, however, did not live long.

In August a letter to Khatami from Clinton was relayed through the Oman government.¹² The US president addressed Khatami in a cordial tone but then went on to claim that the IRGC, along with certain Saudis and Lebanese, “were directly involved in the planning and execution” of the Khobar bombings. Clinton asked Khatami for “a clear commitment” to “ensure an end to Iranian involvement” in terrorist activities and to “bring those in Iran responsible for the bombing to justice either in Iran or by extraditing them to Saudi Arabia.”

The letter produced a negative reaction within Iran's policy circles, including Khatami. While Clinton intended it as an olive branch, radicals in Iran believed that it was an attempt to widen the differences between Khatami and the Leadership, and to test Khatami's will and his ability to stand against the IRGC and the Leadership by responding positively to Clinton's letter.

Clinton's timing could not have been worse. Tehran had just witnessed the most severe street protests in 18 years, since MEK had declared its commitment to an armed struggle in 1981. Khatami's priority was to calm down the domestic political environment. He was not prepared to create more tension by responding positively to Clinton's letter, which was perceived as insulting even by Khatami. He also did not believe that the Khobar bombing was the work of Iranians. Bin Laden had most motivation and also the operational capability to carry out that attack. Additionally, Clinton's letter placed the Iranian administration in a difficult position as there were no suspects to hand over. Clinton should have put himself in Khatami's shoes. What was Khatami expected to do, simply based on accusations by the US? Let us not forget that the "wall of mistrust" was applicable to Khatami, too. In fact, the letter further strengthened the notion that these pulls and pushes by the US were ultimately aimed at furthering America's traditional policy of regime change.

At the time Clinton sent the letter, the comprehensive package aimed at restoring harmony to Iran-US relations had been finalized by the SNSC, ready to be sent to the Supreme Leader for his approval. The US president's letter completely derailed the process. The efforts of Khatami and his followers to initiate real change in the relationship between America and Iran failed tragically because of miscommunication.

One major factor that continues to bedevil Iran-US relations is Tehran's general lack of understanding of US politics, and Washington's lack of understanding of politics in Iran. Most of those on the Iranian side did not appreciate that even if Clinton sincerely intended to re-establish relations with Iran, he could not ignore the adverse pressure from Congress and the FBI's assertion that Iran was responsible for the bombing in Saudi Arabia. Louis Freeh, then the Director of the FBI, wrote a piece in June 2012, describing how the Clinton administration sought to prevent the FBI from making the accusation. Freeh was contemptuous of the White House's efforts to save Iran:

[The] White House ... ordered us to stop the practice. Not a good idea, I told Madeleine Albright, who had succeeded Warren

Christopher as secretary of state. ‘The Iranians are complaining,’ she responded. ‘Of course, they are,’ I told her. ‘That’s the point.’ ... By then, I was used to it.”¹³

With reference to the differences between the administration and the Congress, the *New York Times* commented in 1999, “Although it [the administration] would like to re-establish some relations with Iran, the administration faces strong anti-Iranian sentiment in Congress.”¹⁴

Tehran failed to see the similarity between the constraints faced by the US government and themselves. Even though the Supreme Leader had authority over the government, during Khatami’s tenure the breadth of public support for their reformist president’s policies was a major reason for Ayatollah Khamenei supporting Khatami. For instance, a few years later, he reluctantly accepted the government’s confidence-building measures towards the US and the West, including the sensitive issue of cooperation with America in the “war on terror” in Afghanistan. If Iran’s Supreme Leader would respect the Iranian administration how could we expect the president of the United States to simply ignore the members of Congress who represent the will of their constituents?

The leadership was confused. Had Iranians been realistic, Khatami could have answered the letter, explaining why he thought the perpetrators were al-Qaeda. He could have offered Iran’s cooperation in the investigations. Instead, everybody’s mind was made up that the letter was another conspiracy or, at best, an insult. Due to a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the US political system and due to miscommunication, Clinton’s letter was rejected in its entirety, and instead of a personal response from Khatami, the *government* as a whole responded to Clinton, the key sentence of the letter reading: “Such allegations are fabricated solely by those whose illegitimate objectives are jeopardized by stability and security in the region.”¹⁵

Iran Prepares to Attack Afghanistan

The Taliban were Afghan students who studied in Pakistan’s *Madrassas* (Islamic schools). In these schools, young Afghans—poor, deprived and many of them orphans—received an ultra-orthodox Islamic education which was handled and managed by an extremist Islamic organization called *Jamiat-Ul-Ulama-i-Islam* (The Group of Islamic Clergies).

Young Afghans who were trained in these schools were totally disconnected from the outside world. They saw the world around them through a filter of an extremist interpretation of Islam. Modernity and reform in religion was considered a great sin. There was to be no television, no newspapers, no music or entertainment ... nothing. These homeless youth were living, learning, and growing up in these *Madrassas* and all they were taught was an interpretation of Islam which unquestionably believed that “jihad” was the only way to deal with the infidels. The *Madrassas* would give them three meals a day, a place to sleep, blankets, and clothes. A huge budget had to be allocated for educating thousands of students in these *Madrassas*, but how? Pakistan, under Zia-ul-Haq and Benazir Bhutto, was so poor that it had to seek help from richer countries. We believed that the majority of the money came from Saudi Arabia.

In 1992, Islamic groups overthrew Najibollah’s communist government and captured Kabul. There was no word about the Taliban up to that point. They were not part of the resistance movement and no one heard about them during the war against the Soviets. In 1994, lawlessness, chaos, and civil war swept across Afghanistan. People were killed and homes were destroyed. Thousands were left homeless and hungry. People who were tired of 20 years of unrest and war were looking for someone, a God-sent hero perhaps, to restore law and order. After 300 years, the Pashtun tribe lost control of Kabul. Uzbeks and Tajiks, historically the Pashtuns’ rivals, now controlled the capital.

In 1994, a small group of Taliban who were ethnically Pashtun, led by a Mullah named Muhammad Omar from a village near Kandahar, appeared out of nowhere. Omar had lost one eye during the resistance against the Soviets. Within two years, the Taliban grew into a military force, with tens of thousands of fighters. By 1996 they were moving in waves from south of Afghanistan to the north. In September 1996, Kabul fell and one of the most violent Islamic groups in Afghanistan seized power. Schools were closed. Girls and women were banned from work outside of the home. Sports, entertainment, or any symbol of joy and celebration, were considered a sin—no music, no TV. Life froze in Afghanistan.

In August 1998, the Taliban stormed Mazar Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan which was one of the strongholds of the Afghan Northern Alliance, supported by Iran. The Taliban, sworn enemies of the Shias, carried out a massacre, mainly targeting the Hazaras, a Shia Farsi-speaking ethnic group. During the mass murders, they attacked the

Iranian consulate in Mazar Sharif, capturing and killing nine Iranians, eight of them diplomats.

A fierce debate now began within the SNSC as to response options, including a military invasion of Afghanistan to root out the Taliban. The majority of the SNSC were positive about military action, and the decision was taken to call up 100,000 troops to assemble on the border with Afghanistan. Rouhani, then secretary of the SNSC, and some others including myself, were in the minority group that argued against military intervention in Afghanistan. We did not want Iran to initiate a war against any of its neighbors, particularly as the Taliban did not represent the nation of Afghanistan, or *any* single nation. The supporters of the attack surmised that the Taliban and al-Qaeda jointly presented a serious threat to the security of Iran, the region, and even the whole world.

The situation was extremely dangerous. With a significant military mobilization along the Afghanistan borders, we were one step away from engaging in what might be a long and bloody war. Ultimately, the final report on this situation was sent to the Supreme Leader. Based on my experience, I expected the Supreme Leader to follow the recommendation of the SNSC, which was the practice more than 90 percent of the time, even though, under article 176 of the Iranian constitution, he had the authority to veto the decisions of the SNSC. This time, however, in a historic decision, he ruled against military intervention in Afghanistan. Thanks to him, a bloody war was prevented. Ironically, a few years later, we collaborated with the US, perceived by many in the Iranian *nezam* to be our arch enemy, in toppling the brutal and fanatical Taliban.

The decision not to go to war against the Taliban and our later cooperation with the US in overthrowing them demonstrates that Iran's foreign policy is not driven purely by religious beliefs and/or emotions. Numerous examples illustrate the fact that pragmatism clearly supersedes ideology.

Albright makes "The Boldest Attempt"

On March 17, 2000, a few days before the Iranian New Year, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made an unprecedented, major overture to Tehran. Frankly, I have to admit that when I learned about the contents of her speech, I was impressed. The *Washington Post* rightfully called it "the boldest attempt yet by the Clinton administration" to foster

better relations between Iran and the US.¹⁶ I would go even further and describe it as the boldest attempt up to this date by the US government to, in Albright's words, "plant the seeds of a new relationship" between Iran and the United States.

She began by "wishing all Iranian-Americans a Happy New Year," and in Farsi, of course with her American accent, said "Eid-e-shuma-Mubarak," meaning, "Happy New Year." The speech contained three significant elements. First, Albright did not explicitly apologize, but admitted that "in 1953 the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh." She also acknowledged that, "it is easy to see ... why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs."¹⁷

Second, Albright went on to recognize that, "during the next quarter century" following the coup, the United States and the West gave sustained backing to the Shah's regime, which, "brutally repressed political dissent." And last, but not least, she quoted President Clinton, restating that, "the United States must bear its fair share of responsibility for the problems that have arisen in Iranian-US relations." Mrs. Albright condemned "aspects of US policy towards Iraq, during its conflict with Iran," and called them "regrettably shortsighted." Albright concluded with the following hopeful appeal: "[O]n behalf of the government and the people of the United States, I call upon Iran to join us in writing a new chapter in our shared history."

After learning about the speech, I ran to Hassan Rouhani to discuss it. I told him that based on the conciliatory tone and spirit of the speech, we could conclude that in essence the US government had apologized in front of the world for its misbehavior towards Iran in the last half a century and was saying, "Let's fix it." I told Rouhani that, "If I were a decision-maker, I would declare a national celebration and would take the opportunity to launch direct talks with the US to overcome two decades of hostilities." Rouhani agreed that this was an opportunity that we should not miss, but he was skeptical about the Supreme Leader's reaction because of the negative part of Albright's speech. Later, I said exactly the same thing to Kamal Kharrazi, the Foreign Minister, and he also agreed. President Khatami also shared this opinion during my discussion with him. We all saw the glass half full.

However, conscious of the sensitivities of the Iranian political system in general, and that at this particular time, tensions between

the conservative camp and the reformists were growing, my fear was that some comments made by Albright could overshadow the overall positive tone of her speech. At one point Albright had said that “[the US government’s] grim view towards Iran is reinforced by the the Iranian Government’s repression at home.” She had also condemned Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and its continued terrorist activities, adding that “until these policies change, fully normal ties between our governments will not be possible, and our principal sanctions will remain.”

But the straw that broke the camel’s back were her remarks that, “despite the trend towards democracy, control over the military, judiciary, courts and police remains in unelected hands.” This part of her speech was clearly directed at Ayatollah Khamenei. For Khatami and the reform movement, Albright’s message could be interpreted as, “We accept Khatami and the reform movement, but we don’t accept the Supreme Leader and institutions under his control.”

Albright’s negative tone was understandable in the political context. Any high-ranking official in the US administration, including the president, would have their own constraints when talking about Iran. They cannot entirely disregard Congress, which is historically pro-Israel, as well as pressure groups and lobby groups within the American political system. However, challenging the Supreme Leader was a strategic mistake.

The issue of human rights, although in a somewhat inconsistent fashion,¹⁸ is also one of the major elements in US foreign policy. No high-ranking US official can ignore it when it comes to an unfriendly state. In her speech, Albright clearly revealed the differences between the administration and the Congress with regards to Iran:

In fact, Congress is now considering legislation that would mandate the attachment of Iranian diplomatic and other assets as compensation for acts of terrorism committed against American citizens. We are working with Congress to find a solution that will satisfy the demands of justice without setting a precedent ... that would destroy prospects for a successful dialogue with Iran.

When Albright delivered her speech, we were already one and a half years into Khatami’s presidency. Unlike Rafsanjani’s period in office, which was marred by some unfortunate events such as assassinations and the Antwerp affair, Khatami’s presidency had witnessed no such incidents, and the rogue cell within the Ministry of Intelligence and

National Security had been dismantled. So Iran did not expect the controversial issue of human rights be raised at that juncture.

While the “unelected” comment could be interpreted as a US attempt to marginalize the Supreme Leader, and support for Khatami an attempt to create a wedge within the *nezam*, the comment is in fact not accurate. Based on the Iranian constitution, the Iranian people elect the members of the Assembly of Experts which, in turn, elects the Supreme Leader. In many European and other democratic countries, people elect the members of parliament who will then elect the chancellor or prime minister. Direct elections for the 86 members of the current assembly are held every eight years and are next due in 2014. Some may argue that the “unelected” Guardian Council has the power to vet all the candidates for the Assembly of Experts which elects the leader. In that case, by the same token, the president can also be considered “unelected” because the candidates for president must also be vetted by the Guardian Council.

The Guardian Council is made of up 12 members: six Islamic clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader himself, and another six jurists elected by the parliament (*Majlis*) from candidates nominated by the chief of the judiciary (who is, in turn, nominated by the Supreme Leader). The Guardian Council has legislative and electoral authority. It must approve all bills passed by the *Majlis*, has the power to veto bills, interprets the constitution, and vets all candidates for president, parliament, and the Assembly of Experts. The unelected Expediency Council resolves disputes between the *Majlis* and the Guardian Council.

Furthermore, the problem with the US Secretary of State’s speech might not simply be that it represented another unwarranted interjection by America into the internal affairs of Iran, but that it might be manipulated by the radical faction of the reform movement as a means of taking control of Iran’s foreign policy. A few days later, an influential organization within the radical faction of the reform movement, the Organization of the Mujahideen of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, referred to Albright’s speech as “a kind of victory and an achievement for ... Khatami’s government.” Supporting direct talks with the US, the organization also asked foreign-policy-makers of Iran “to carry out a logical, calculated and wise analysis of the changes that have come about in American stances and policies.”¹⁹

Ayatollah Khamenei, however, furiously reacted to the speech, noting the three key elements already referred to:

[M]ore than 40 years have elapsed since ... the coup d’état. It is

only now that they are admitting that they were behind the coup d'état. They admit that they supported and backed the dictatorial, oppressive, corrupt and subservient regime of the Shah for 25 years. And they are now saying that they supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran.”²⁰

Rejecting the US government's overture, the Iranian Supreme Leader added:

It is not as if some people can approach America in the hope of starting a dialogue. America's animosity will not be resolved through negotiations. America is only pursuing its own interests in Iran. If ... an independent government manages Iran, then America would act with hostility towards it [anyway].

Many Western experts posit that anti-Americanism is one of the pillars that sustains the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the reality is that although Iran undoubtedly uses hostility towards the US when convenient and/or necessary, the Iranian leadership in fact resists the Americans for two reasons: first, because the US has relentlessly tried to dismantle Iran's system; and second, because of its profound mistrust of the US. The threat perceived in Albright's comments by Iran's leadership, and its distrust of the American government as well as Iranian reformists, led to another huge, missed opportunity in Iran-US relations.

Why Ayatollah Khamenei Says “No” to Talks and Relations with the United States

What is presented here reflects my 25-year experience of Ayatollah Khamenei, including meetings with him and discussions with many of the highest ranked people in Iran, such as former Iranian presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, SNSC members, several ministers and high-echelon religious figures.

In the mid-1980, when I was editor-in-chief of the *Tehran Times*, a group of newspaper staff and I met with Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's president at the time. During our discussions, a question was raised seeking his opinion about relations with the United States. The Ayatollah expressed the view that we could ultimately normalize our relation based on mutual respect and non interference. Over time, and

in view of US reactions to Iranian overtures, he became much more conservative out of deep concern that the US sought regime change.

The fact that the Supreme Leader is unquestionably the most powerful figure in Iranian politics does not mean he is immune to the influence of other forces operating in a complex, frequently changing system of conflicting political and societal factions. Iran has a rare political and social structure which is shaped by two popular opposing camps: modernists and traditionalists. These forces shape a clash between two civilizations *within* a civilization.

Four major, interrelated elements shape Ayatollah Khamenei's perception of the US. First, he wholeheartedly believes that regardless of all the ups and downs, pushes and pulls between Iran and the US, Washington's ultimate intention is to topple Iran's Islamic system and subordinate them within a *Pax Americana*, as it did during the Shah's era after the 1953 coup. Ayatollah Khamenei maintains that the US, no matter which school of thought and party is in power or which president has taken office, intends to "wipe out the Islamic Republic" with all possible means at its disposal. The conclusion he draws from US rhetoric, policies, and behavior is that the US will not relent from its desire for regime change unless the current government surrenders its principles, religious beliefs, political structure, and independence.

The United States' tacit support for Saddam Hussein's invasion and provision of material support, its covert operations, support for belligerent groups and the Islamic Republic's opposition (including a budgetary provision), its denial of Iran's right to peaceful enrichment under the NPT, and its intrusive and paralyzing economic sanctions are all viewed by Ayatollah Khamenei as indisputable attempts to bring about an end to the Islamic Republic. He maintains that the US's primary objective is to undermine the Islamic government by fostering internal disorder and, ultimately, regime change.

The second element that shapes Ayatollah Khamenei's disposition towards the US is his firm belief that US foreign policy in the Middle East, and specifically regarding Iran, is overwhelmingly dominated by the pro-Israel lobby. From his point of view, even the president of the United States does not have any authority over US foreign policy. He is surprised that year after year, the president or other high-level officials of the most powerful country on earth attend American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) gatherings and report what they have done to undermine the Iranian government and satisfy pro-Israel lobby demands. Although there is in general a consensus within the *nezam*

about Israel's influence on US Middle East policy, some argue that it is the Zionists who determine the US foreign policy, and not Americans.

The third element shaping the Supreme Leader's perception of the US is his extreme mistrust of American politics. The documents confiscated by students after seizing the US Embassy seemed to justify such a stance by many high-echelon Iranian politicians, including Ayatollah Khamenei. According to those documents, the embassy was involved in espionage and the fostering of covert links to members of the new government and army.

Finally, Ayatollah Khamenei's sees the American government and the system it represents as addicted to arrogance and hegemony. He feels that if a country is not seen as a "great power," then a lord–serf relationship is the only kind of relationship that the US is prepared to accept.

Many believe that the Iranian system is solely driven by a religious impetus. That assessment is incorrect. Underneath the superficial layers of religious beliefs, Iranians are deeply nationalistic. They see themselves as a great country, accredited with being the cradle of civilization; rich with culture and history dating back thousands of years; positively contributing to the world in many fields including science, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, art, and music. All of these attributes lend themselves to the heightened nationalism esteemed by Iranians.

So, when Congress or the US administration attempt to bully using threats and intimidation, or try to humiliate the Iranian government by endless repetition of the "all options on the table" mantra and other rhetoric, Iran's strong sense of national pride is offended. Such behavior on the part of the Americans also strengthens Ayatollah Khamenei's view that the US is not looking for an equal and balanced relationship. Rather, it seeks, as he describes it, a lord–serf relationship.

However, despite Ayatollah Khamenei's pessimistic view of the American political system, Rafsanjani and Khatami clearly espoused reconciliation with the US. Rafsanjani fought hard to attain this objective and "emphasized that the resumption of relations with Washington 'would not be in contradiction with Iran's objectives' if American policies were 'truly corrected.'"²¹ Rafsanjani did his best to bring the Lebanese hostage crisis to an end with the hopes that President George H. W. Bush would honor his commitment that "goodwill begets goodwill." He failed to do so. Under Khatami's watch, Iran helped the US in Afghanistan, hoping for reciprocation, and offered a grand bargain that was rejected by the administration of President George W. Bush.

Some might argue that the overtures by Rafsanjani and Khatami meant little because the Supreme Leader could veto them. But Rafsanjani and Khatami would not have made those overtures if they knew they were futile. Both leaders believed that if they could find a way to reduce the level of mistrust by encouraging the US to make some friendly moves, Ayatollah Khamenei would demonstrate flexibility in his own stance on Iran–US relations. Ayatollah Khamenei, although reluctant and pessimistic, did not block those efforts at rapprochement. In fact, he continues to emphasize that he has never said that relations with the US will remain severed forever.²²

But in practical terms, Ayatollah Khamenei argues that the US goal of having bilateral talks with Iran is not motivated by a desire to resolve problems and disputes between the two countries. He feels that the US would approach such talks prepared to twist arms, threaten, intimidate, and ultimately withdraw, if they felt that Iran was not prepared to concede the upper hand to America. He is also concerned that America's powerful media would make the situation even worse, humiliating the revolution and Iranians, thus damaging Iran's stature as the leading anti-imperialist country in the Muslim world beyond repair. He therefore posits that if Iran cannot be 100 percent certain that the US position has changed, it must not risk humiliation in "bilateral" talks, the outcome of which might have been determined in advance.

Ayatollah Khamenei is also conscious of the fact that some security analysts have suggested that any restoration of relations with the US might simply provide an opportunity for American intelligence to infiltrate Iran—a thesis made more credible by the previous history of the 1953 coup and the documents seized from the American Embassy, apart from the Ayatollah's prevailing mindset. "The US waged war against Iraq while Washington had diplomatic ties with Baghdad, secondly diplomatic ties with the US would pave the way for the infiltration of US spies into the country, so diplomatic relations with Washington would not be useful to the Iranian nation," said the Supreme Leader.²³

One of the less obvious hurdles to the normalization of relations between Iran and the US, in my opinion, may be the issue of "cultural intrusion" or *tahajome farhangi*, as Ayatollah Khamenei puts it. A large faction of conservatives, including grassroots supporters of the institution of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which is symbolized and represented by the Supreme Leader, resist moral, social, and liberal political values. This is because their religious

principles are fiercely in conflict with the Western culture that permits sexual freedom, consumption of alcohol, women wearing revealing clothes, and the separation of church (religion) and state. In addition, Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the US deliberately promotes liberal values among the Iranian young, both to erode their religious beliefs and ultimately to undermine the influence of Iran's Islamic system.

The Iranian ruling elite, including the Supreme Leader, has no doubt that numerous Farsi television stations, primarily in the United States, are directly or indirectly sponsored by the US government as a major channel of cultural aggression towards Iranian society. This notion was reinforced by the allocation of \$75 million in the US's 2007 budget to expand radio and television broadcasts in Iran, an action that stirred anger among Iran's conservatives.

Some argue that hostile reactions to US cultural intrusion by the ruling elite in Iran are part of a "cold war" strategy, primarily relating to power rather than religious motives. The reality is that apart from the leader of Iran's revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, and a limited circle of his followers, the vast majority of the clergy had been apolitical until the mid-1970s, neither opposing nor supporting the Shah openly. However, the majority of the clergy eventually joined the revolutionary movement since the Shah's regime continued to promote Westernization and failed to deal with what they perceived to be moral decadence in the country.

Ayatollah Khamenei views deliberate cultural intrusion to be part of the US project of regime change, but some ultra-conservatives assert that the restoration of relations with the US, irrespective of the "regime change" factor, will result in the expansion of trade and commerce and thus in a greater number of Iranians visiting the US and vice versa. The outcome of such exchanges, they argue, could be the rise of "Westoxicated" technocrats as a notable force in Iranian society, ultimately challenging existing authority. Nonetheless, the Leader has no objection to people-to-people relations.

9/11 and a Short-Lived Honeymoon

George W. Bush began his presidency with a controversial dispute over election results and it ended with the quagmires that he and his administration created for the US government in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the financial crisis that also occurred under his

watch. When Bush took office, nobody in Tehran knew what the future held for Iran and the world. In fact, the prevailing opinion was that we would see another pragmatic Bush and that there might be the possibility of reducing tension during his presidency. At the time, Iran's parliament and the executive office were dominated by reformists who would have embraced an improvement in relations with the US.

The first positive sign came from Colin Powell who, in his confirmation hearing, said, "We have important differences on matters of policy [with Iran]. But these differences need not preclude greater interaction, whether in more normal commerce or increased dialogue."²⁴ Also, the Khobar bombing case which was one of the biggest hurdles to rapprochement between the two states since 1996 came to an end. In the US Attorney General's final statement, he said that the "Iranian government inspired, supported, and supervised" the terrorist act, but also mentioned that, "this indictment does not name as defendants individual members of the Iranian government."²⁵ Under the circumstances, the damage had been minimized.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 could have opened a new chapter in Iran-US relations. Iran was among the first countries to denounce the 9/11 Twin Tower terror attacks in New York. Immediately following the condemnation, the SNSC actively began to work within the new paradigm that was created by the September 11 terrorist attack and the subsequent US declaration of a "war on terror." We were also concerned with the extremist Salafis and the Taliban, whose ideologies we viewed as hostile towards Shia Iran and also dangerous to the broader region.

Prior to George W. Bush assuming the presidency, a round of talks between Iran and the US began in 1998 but it was not bilateral. UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi initiated those talks under the banner of "6+2." The countries involved included six neighbors of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—as well as Russia and the United States. They met in New York to address the situation in Afghanistan. But in 2001, before the 9/11 attacks, and more seriously after the tragic events, there began substantive, behind-the-scenes negotiations between the Iranian and US governments, seeking avenues of cooperation on Afghanistan.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who had lived in Iran before and knew Farsi, led the US team in its negotiations. Iran's negotiations team consisted of Iranian ambassadors Reza Ziaran, Zargar Yaghoobi, and Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian and a member of the security

establishment responsible for Afghanistan. I did not attend the meetings but was involved, as head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC, in crafting the framework for Iran's cooperation with the US. Meetings were held in Geneva and Paris while both parties had agreed to include German and Italian representatives in the meetings. The presence of these representatives was precautionary. In the event of the meetings being discovered and revealed by the media, both parties could deny that there had been any direct communication between the US and Iran. Later, the Germans and Italians disappeared and talks became one-on-one.

The meetings covered a host of issues from terrorism to drug trafficking, and even casual talks about historical issues between the two countries. Aside from the subject matter of these meetings, of even greater significance was that these two governments talked to each other for the first time since mid-1980, at which time the Iran–Contra scandal abruptly halted such communication. The talks were not hidden from Ayatollah Khamenei and he did not exert any objection to the talks, provided that they were focused on Afghanistan and not Iran–US relations.

We were pursuing two objectives. First, we sought ways to unseat the Taliban and eliminate extremist terrorists, namely al-Qaeda. Both of these groups were nestled in Afghanistan, and both were arch enemies of Shias and the government of Iran. Second, we wanted to look for ways to test cooperation with the Americans, thus decreasing the level of mistrust and tension between us. During these meetings, neither party pursued the subject of Iran–US relations. Nonetheless, we did the groundwork for significant, mutual cooperation on Afghanistan during these meetings, resulting in Iran's assistance during the attack on the Taliban. Crocker describes the atmosphere of those talks in this way:

During those pre-attack discussions—and you'll remember the air war began in early October—the Iranian thrust was, you know, what do you need to know to knock their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here's the map. You want to know where we think their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they're going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We've got the answers; we've been working with those guys for years. This was an unprecedented period since the revolution of, again, a US–Iranian dialogue on a particular issue where we very much had common interest and common cause.²⁶

In those meetings, the Iranian delegation promised to capture any al-Qaeda and Taliban members who fled to Iran in the case of an invasion by the US. They also promised assistance in planning the attack, the provision of intelligence, and information about Afghan society, including the roles and capabilities of different political and ethnic groups. Most importantly, the Iranian delegation promised the full cooperation of their ally, the Afghan Northern Alliance, in bringing down the Taliban and rooting out terrorism in that region led by al-Qaeda.

The IRGC was actively involved in organizing the attack by the Northern Alliance to free Herat, the third largest city in Afghanistan, from the Taliban rule, and also played a role in the capture of Kabul before any American troops had arrived.

After the fall of the Taliban, Iran arrested and extradited approximately 500 al-Qaeda members to their respective countries. Meanwhile, a parallel team started to work with the Americans in a UN-sponsored framework to create a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan. This time, the American delegation was led by Ambassador James Dobbins and the Iranian team was led by Ambassador Javad Zarif, then Deputy Foreign Minister. Javad, a close friend of mine, is one of the savviest diplomats that Iran has ever had. Zarif and Dobbins met every day before the Bonn Conference to make sure that Is were dotted and Ts were crossed. The conference, however, proceeded quite differently than anticipated. Disputes between Afghan warlords over the distribution of ministerial positions nearly brought the conference to a collapse.

During a fall 2012 conference in Berlin, James Dobbins told me that Hamid Karzai was the United States' favored candidate to lead the new Afghan government. "Iranians also supported us," Dobbins said. Dobbins highlighted the role of Javad Zarif in the success of the Bonn Conference and the establishment of the new Afghan government. According to a report by Michael Hirsh, in an interview Dobbins, "pointed out that Karzai was a Pashtun from the south, like the majority of the Afghan population." Tajiks from the Northern Alliance, historically rivals to the Pashtuns, led by Yunus Qanooni, tenaciously demanded the majority share in the new government "since they were the people that had captured Kabul according to Dobbins." Dobbins says "that by 4.00 a.m., they had reached a very critical moment. Nobody was able to change Qanooni's mind. Zarif finally and authoritatively whispered in Qanooni's ear that, 'This is the best deal you can get.' And Qanooni said, 'OK.'"²⁷

Even after the creation of a new Afghan government at the Bonn Conference, talks continued. But suddenly, there came a veritable bombshell. President Bush, only a few weeks after the Bonn Conference, stunned us by including Iran in the “axis of evil” during his January 2002 State of the Union address. Talks continued but the Iranians’ appetite for cooperation was diminished. Every person involved, from Khatami down, had the same feeling—betrayed! The word *namak-nashnas* (a person one feeds, and later expresses betrayal rather than appreciation) was the word frequently used to characterize George Bush’s behavior.

In the aftermath of Bush’s address, Khatami told me, “I am confident that Bush put the final nail in the coffin of Iran–US relations.” He added, “I guess any improvement in relations must be ruled out, at least during my presidency.” This did not mean that we would stop our efforts, but the high level of hope after overthrowing the Taliban was replaced with pessimism. Khatami was confident that for at least 10 years, any attempt at rapprochement bearing meaningful fruit would be impossible.

Hassan Rouhani, then secretary of the SNSC, told me that the Americans had made a big mistake. “Afghanistan could become a model of cooperation between Iran and the US for crisis management in the whole region,” he said. He added that Ayatollah Khamenei had told him at the very beginning that “the Americans’ invitation for cooperation is tactical.” He employed a Farsi saying in his analysis of America’s action: “[A]s soon as their donkey passed the bridge [meaning as soon as they got through it and didn’t need you anymore] they will go back to their previous hostile position.”

But the most interesting reaction came from Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, a division of the IRGC responsible for Afghan affairs, who was key in organizing the Afghan Northern Alliance in their attack on Kabul. After one of the SNSC meetings, Qasem told me, without holding back on his ill feelings toward George Bush’s response to Iran’s invaluable assistance, that when cooperation had begun, he had suspected that the US request for our help might have been a tactical move and not intended to lead to long-term cooperation.

But I also viewed Iran’s assistance as a no-lose proposition. If the US was sincere, we would help them topple our arch enemy and al-Qaeda, an extremist terrorist group that threatened our security, the region, and the international community. Then broader cooperation would be possible. Qasem jokingly responded that “in that case, the dreams of

you westoxificated diplomats would come true.” Nonetheless, he agreed that even if the US was not sincere, we would still have eliminated our enemy.

Qasem posited that if the US wanted to betray us and break away from us once they were established in Afghanistan, they would become trapped like the Soviets before them. Americans were not familiar with the complexities of Afghanistan. “Americans do not know the region, Americans do not know Afghanistan, Americans do not know Iran,” Qasem added. In any case, we would win, he argued, and if the Americans crossed us, they would have to leave in defeat.

Ironically, the Northern Alliance that was funded by Iran ousted the Taliban from power in Kabul with air support from the Americans. Iran had formed the backbone of foreign aid to the Northern Alliance while they actively brought numerous different ethnic groups together, shaping the resistance against the Taliban. “In the first half of 1999 alone, thirty-three cargo planes with 380 metric tons of small arms, ammo, and fuel arrived from the eastern Iranian air base of Mashhad to Tajikistan for transport to the Northern Alliance,” according to David Crist, a senior historian for the US government.²⁸

The Suspicious Karine A Affair and the Axis of Evil

On January 4, 2002, Iran was suddenly accused of complicity in smuggling a huge consignment of weapons to the Palestinians. The news captured the headlines. According to a January 4, 2002 statement by Lieutenant General Shaul Mofaz of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), “With the break of dawn on Thursday, January 3, 2002, IDF forces took control of the ship *Karine A*, which was carrying about 50 tons of warfare and sabotage equipment, meant to be smuggled into the Palestinian Authority area.” General Mofaz added that, “on the *Karine A*, we found about 50 tons of varied warfare, most of it [of] Iranian origin.”²⁹

Weapons were stored in 80 large wooden crates, including advanced weaponry such as Katyusha rockets, rifles, mortar shells, mines and a variety of anti-tank missiles. “Senior figures in the Palestinian Authority were involved in the smuggling,” according to the IDF.³⁰ “That attempt,” according to General Mofaz, “pointed directly at the close cooperation between the Palestinian Authority, Iran and other terror organizations.” By *other terror organizations*, the general meant Hezbollah of Lebanon, who, according to the IDF,

had been part of the team involved in loading the weapons near an Iranian island.³¹

Iran denied the accusations, the Iranian Defense Minister, Ali Shamkhani, stating, “The Islamic Republic of Iran has had no military relations with Yasir Arafat and no steps have been taken by any Iranian organization for the shipment of arms to the mentioned lands.”³² Two weeks later, the *Jerusalem Post* published a piece which declared that “some Israeli pundits warn that denials cannot be dismissed offhand, because the evidence is simply too shaky.”³³

Following the incident, Israeli hardliners pursued two goals. They aimed to nullify the Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the Palestinians which was a framework for peace between the two entities. If the Oslo Peace Accords remained intact, it could ultimately lead to the formation of a Palestinian state. Also, the framing of Iran and Hezbollah as terrorist entities might stifle the process of reconciliation and cooperation between Iran and the US, which had gained momentum in the preceding twelve months. Israeli hardliner maneuvers succeeded.

Immediately following the interception of the *Karine A*, Benjamin Netanyahu, a future contender for prime minister of Israel and a hardliner in the Likud party, said that a Palestinian state must never be established.³⁴ He also asserted that, “With its own independent port, such a state would receive shiploads of arms, day and night, and we would find ourselves facing a terrorist state, armed to the teeth.” One day after the incident, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement which read: “Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said that the seizing of the ship is an important turning point for the Palestinian Authority in making [a] choice. ‘They cannot continue playing the game. They have to make a strategic decision whether they support terrorism or they are against it.’”³⁵ The statement added that “Since the ship was carrying Iranian weapons, Foreign Minister Peres will next week call upon the leaders of the international community to declare Iran as a terror-supporting state.” Similar statements by Israeli officials flooded media and news outlets.

Judging by George W. Bush’s response, Israel’s tactics worked. Bush later disclosed that, “Arafat sent a letter pleading his innocence. But we and the Israelis had evidence that disproved the Palestinians’ claim. Arafat had lied to me. I never trusted him again. In fact, I never spoke to him again.”³⁶ The issue of Palestinian statehood has not held any meaningful place in US foreign policy towards the Middle East since then.

Regarding Iran, the timing of the *Karine A* affair could not have been better for anyone seeking to undermine the prospect of cooperation between Iran and the US. The two countries were on track to solve one of the most complex and protracted international conflicts at their highest level of cooperation in the Iranian post-revolution era. Instead, the *Karine A* incident basically demolished everything that Iran and the US had been working on for more than a year. Three weeks later, President Bush included Iran in the “axis of evil.” His message was clear. The new relationship status between the US and Iran was strikingly similar to that of a Manichean war in which the US represented “good,” and Iran represented “evil.”

Some may argue that the neoconservative administration of George Bush would not have reconciled with Iran, anyway. The US needed Iran during the attack on Afghanistan, but once it had “used” the Iranian government to advance its goal, that is, the overthrow of the Taliban and the creation of a new Afghan government, it went back to its 20-year-long hostile position. This argument is flawed on two counts.

First, secret talks and negotiations between Iran and the US started months before September 11, 2001. During the Geneva talks, both parties sought ways to convey their grievances to the other side, hoping to build a more congenial atmosphere in which to gradually resolve conflicts between them. Of course, after 9/11, the talks became more objective and focused on the issue of unseating the Taliban and dismantling the terrorist and fanatic al-Qaeda organization.

Second, the negotiations continued almost a year after the “axis of evil” speech, albeit with less enthusiasm for cooperation on the part of Iran. Key individuals involved in those talks included the White House National Security Advisor, Hillary Mann Leverett; her Iranian counterpart; Ambassador Zarif, the Iranian ambassador to the UN; and Ambassador Reza Alborzi, the Iranian ambassador in Geneva. Yet, a few days after Bush’s “axis of evil” speech, the *Washington Post* wrote, “The discovery of Iran’s role in smuggling 50 tons of weapons to the Palestinians was a body blow to the State Department’s initiative to engage Iran.”³⁷

Hillary Mann, who attended the meetings together with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and sometimes alone, remembers that the Iranians “specifically” told her, “time and again, they were doing this [helping the US] because they understood the impact of this attack on the U.S., and they thought that if they helped us *unconditionally*, that would be the way to change the dynamic for the first time in twenty-five years” (emphasis added).³⁸ She went on to say, “It was revolutionary. It could

have changed the world.” But she also recalls that in the first meeting following Bush’s speech, “They [Iranians] said they had put their necks out to talk to us and they were taking big risks with *their careers and their families and their lives*” (emphasis added).³⁹

In 2010, Hillary told me, “Although I am sorry that the US lost a big opportunity ... I am happy the direct talks played an important role [in] changing my mind on Iran. That’s why I believe direct talks can change many American officials’ mindset about the real Iran and not artificial Iran made by media.” Ryan Crocker’s account of his first meeting after the speech is no less clear about how the Iranian negotiators felt:

I remember fairly clearly my next encounter with my Iranian colleague. Those things in life that are least pleasant stay with you the longest and with the greatest clarity. And it was not a happy encounter. That was the time—and he was gracious enough to inform me—that the Iranian government chose to export Gulbuddin Hekmatyar [anti-American Afghan warlord] back to Afghanistan ... and here I am indulging in conjecture; it’s great to be a free man; I can do that—this was also the point, I think, where the Iranians made a strategic decision, which is can’t work with those sons-of-bitches; told you all along, can’t do it ... after January of 2002, although talks continued, but with increasingly less result and with increasingly less authoritative representation on the Iranian side.”⁴⁰

“The government of Iran could not have been involved in the *Karine A* affair” Khatami told me in a meeting after the event. “Reducing tensions and hostilities was what I was looking for while I kept my hope to genuinely seek rapprochement and normal relations with the Americans. We invested immoderately in that direction. Some Muslim countries blame us because of not having any sympathy towards Yasser Arafat and the so-called Palestinian Authority. Now it is funny that Israelis accuse us of strategic relations with Arafat!”

The fact is that the relationship between Iran and the Palestinian Authority was more than cold—it was positively strained. Yasser Arafat had supported Iraq during its war with Iran in the 1980s, and when Arafat signed the Oslo Accords with Israel in 1993, Iran froze all support to the PLO and accused it of treason.⁴¹ Many radicals in Iran considered Arafat a traitor to Muslims and Palestinians.

In Iran, there was a strong tendency to believe that the *Karine A* incident had been staged by Israeli hardliners. Some other Western analysts told me that they thought it could have been the work of a

rogue cell in Iran seeking to undermine Khatami's authority and the efforts in negotiations to improve relations with the US, bringing them to a deadlock. While I do not credit such an assessment, the question of "Who did it and why" has so far failed to produce a satisfactory answer. But one thing is clear: the big victims in the *Karine A* affair was first, Iran-US détente, and second, the moderate current in Iran which relentlessly worked for better relations with the United States.

A Most Perturbing Revelation

Shocking revelations about the existence of Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities in August 2002 began one of the most complex international conflicts in the post-Cold War era. The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a political branch of the militant-terrorist group MEK, identified Natanz as an undeclared nuclear facility responsible for "nuclear fuel production."

There was an increase in pressure, beginning with the visit of Mohammad ElBaradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to Natanz in 2003. ElBaradei announced during his visit that Iran had now joined the nations with access to nuclear fuel production technology. The IAEA raised a number of technical concerns as part of its inspection, but found no evidence to suggest a diversion towards nuclear weapons. During intense and extensive negotiations that followed, the EU3 (the UK, France, and Germany) implored Iran to suspend its fuel production activities for its civilian nuclear power reactor, that is, enriching uranium. They reasoned that the uranium enrichment capability was key to building the material for a nuclear bomb, regardless of intent. Uranium exists naturally in underground deposits consisting of a mixture of about 0.7 percent uranium-235, which is easily fissionable, and about 99.3 percent uranium-238, which is not fissionable. For civilian nuclear power plants, the proportion of uranium-235 is enriched and increased to about 5 percent while in the case of nuclear weapons the enrichment typically is increased to 90 percent purity or more.

Iran viewed the call to suspend its uranium enrichment activity as another means of denying its "inalienable right" to nuclear technology under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁴² The NPT allows continued technological development for peaceful purposes, specifically noting "the inalienable right of all parties to the Treaty to develop research,

production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination.”⁴³

Nevertheless, based on the agreement signed in Tehran with the EU3 in October 2003, known as the Saadabad Agreement, we decided to suspend the enrichment for a short period, as a confidence-building and non-legally binding measure. In response, John Sawers, the Political Director of the British Foreign Office, proposed in a letter to his counterparts in France, Germany, and the US that “We may also need to remove one of the Iranian arguments that the suspension called for is ‘voluntary.’ We could do [that] by making the voluntary suspension a mandatory requirement to the Security Council.”⁴⁴

To resolve the dispute peacefully, in March 2005 Iran suggested a number of unprecedented measures based on two broad principles: first, to ensure transparency at its nuclear sites; and, second, to provide guarantees not to divert its nuclear program towards weaponization. The practical proposals included implementing the IAEA Additional Protocol to enable on-site inspections; limiting the expansion of the enrichment program; capping uranium enrichment at 5 percent, enabling its use for fuel but not weapons; and converting enriched uranium additionally to domestic needs, ensuring that there would be no reprocessing and plutonium separation at the heavy water reactor at Arak, south-west of Tehran—a process that could facilitate weaponization. Tehran also suggested rules to guarantee the permanent ban on developing, stockpiling, and using nuclear weapons in return for respect for its right to enrich uranium under the NPT.⁴⁵

In response to our initiative, in August 2005, the EU3 made a new proposal—that Iran suspend uranium enrichment indefinitely. Naturally, Iran rejected the proposal, as it amounted to waiving its right to peaceful nuclear fuel technology. At this point, it was becoming clear that negotiations were being crafted to move in a certain direction that would lead to sanctions and punitive measures against Iran.

Iran conceded that the EU3 would have been within its rights in calling for more “transparency” in relation to Iran’s nuclear program—but the Western countries clearly wanted to move beyond the transparency of Iran’s nuclear activities to “suspension” of them. Iranians accept the need to facilitate maximum transparency, but only within the framework of the NPT. In any case, insistence on created a cycle of distrust towards the Europeans in Iran.

Tehran believed that behind the EU3’s uncompromising stance lay the hand of the United States. Iran became more disenchanted with the negotiations trajectory, with each round of talks followed by increased

sanctions and punitive measures. The insistence on suspension of uranium enrichment further antagonized the Iranians.

I was a member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team with the EU3 and the IAEA between 2003 and 2005, while I chaired the Foreign Relations Committee of the SNSC. During negotiating sessions, we told our EU3 interlocutors that Iran would never accept the denial of access to enrichment under the NPT, and discriminatory impositions outside the NPT, even at the cost of a war.

The issue of double standards was one of our arguments with the Europeans. The West had singled out Iran as a nuclear threat, while overlooking, even actively supporting, other countries' nuclear ambitions. The most obvious cases in point were Israel, India, and Pakistan. None of these countries had signed or ratified the NPT despite possession of large nuclear arsenals. Indeed, the US had signed strategic partnership agreements with India in the defense, security, and nuclear spheres, had pledged more than \$30 billion in direct aid to Pakistan since 1948, and contributed over \$130 billion in direct aid to Tel Aviv in recent decades. Paris had provided Israel with the Dimona reactor, used for weapons development, had furnished Saddam Hussein's Iraq with a weapons-grade fuel nuclear reactor, and provided Pakistan with plutonium extraction technology. It also continued to assist India after it detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1974.

As will be described later, President Khatami's administration and his top nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rouhani, did their best to provide the West with several options to give them peace of mind while protecting Iran's rights. But the opportunity to finalize a deal was missed due to the West's unwillingness to compromise, specifically the US position of "no enrichment" in Iran.⁴⁶ "We were getting somewhere, with respect, and then it's a complicated story, the Americans actually pulled the rug from under [President Mohammad] Khatami's feet and the Americans got what they didn't want" remarked British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.⁴⁷

IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei confirmed this missed opportunity and expressed his disappointment:

The Iranians were willing in 2003, but the administration of then US President George W. Bush was not ... I adhere strictly to the facts, and part of that is that the Americans and the Europeans withheld important documents and information from us. They weren't interested in a compromise with the government in Tehran, but regime change—by any means necessary.⁴⁸

The Americans' uncompromising stance, insisting on the suspension of Iran's fuel production cycle, brought about the failure of the negotiations with Khatami's administration and was a significant factor in the decline of Iran's reform movement—which gave rise to Iran's new conservatives, represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This development complicated the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, increasing international tension, while the people of Iran also paid a big price during the eight years of Ahmadinejad's tenure.

Iran Adamant about Pursuing the Nuclear Project

The US perspective of the matter is that Iran's long-time efforts to conceal its nuclear program, and some conspicuous military dimensions of it, are reason enough for the suspension of uranium enrichment activities⁴⁹ until Iran is able to convince the international community about the program's peaceful nature. Uranium enrichment lies at the heart of the dispute over Iran's nuclear program because high-grade enriched uranium (above 90 percent purity) can be used for building an atomic bomb. To that end, the US campaigned internationally to force Iran into submission. Iran, on the other hand, rejects all accusations that it is pursuing nuclear weaponization. Iran's leader, supported by a faction of the *nezam*, believes that there are in fact other reasons why the US pushes for a timeless and open-ended suspension.

Iran's Supreme Leader firmly believed that America's uncompromising opposition to Iran's possession of nuclear technology is directly linked to its arrogant nature (*khooye estekbari*), wishing to prevent Iran from achieving real independence, establishing self-sufficiency across a variety of sectors and making major technological breakthroughs. Moreover, he maintained that, based on its pattern of behavior over the previous two decades, the US, allied with Tel Aviv, intends to use the nuclear issue as a pretext to overthrow the only country in the Islamic world that stands against US–Israeli domination of the Middle East region.

To make a fair judgment on the current nuclear crisis, it is critical to understand the background to the Iranian nuclear program. During the reign of the Shah, the US laid the foundations of a nuclear Iran through major nuclear deals with the country. Iran's efforts to develop nuclear energy can be traced back to 1957 and the push from the Eisenhower administration. On March 5, 1957, the two countries announced a “proposed agreement for cooperation in research in the

peaceful uses of atomic energy” under the auspices of Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” program.⁵⁰ The US built the first nuclear facility in Iran, the Tehran Research Reactor, in 1967. In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued National Security Decision Memorandum 324, supporting the Shah’s ambitions and helping Iran formulate a plan to build 23 nuclear power reactors.⁵¹

France also cooperated with Iran on enrichment and signed a number of long-term contracts with Iran, while Germany concluded some major deals to build nuclear plants in the country. Britain, too, agreed a number of contracts to supply uranium to Iran. In general, the Americans and Europeans were competing to win lucrative projects to nuclearize Iran. However, the West’s attitude, in particular that of the US, suddenly turned 180 degrees after the revolution.⁵²

The Shah did not start a nuclear military program (at least there is no clear evidence that he did), but ambitious as he was, it was clear that he intended to start one. In 1974 when asked by a French journalist whether Iran would pursue building nuclear weapons, he replied, “Certainly, and sooner than one would think.”⁵³ Americans also knew well that the Shah would build an atomic bomb, a CIA report in 1974 concluded that “If [the Shah] is alive in the mid-1980s and if other countries [particularly India] have proceeded with weapons development, we have no doubt that Iran will follow suit.”⁵⁴ But the United States, despite all the signs pointing to the Shah’s intentions to build nuclear weapons, turned a blind eye on the issue. Akbar Etemad, father of the Iranian nuclear program and head of the Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization under the Shah, has no doubt about the issue: “The Shah’s plan was to build a nuclear bomb.”⁵⁵ The Iranian leadership now asks, quite reasonably, “If an arms race, as a result of Iran’s nuclear weaponization, wasn’t a threat under the Shah’s regime, why then is it a threat now?”

Throughout the last four years of my stay in the US, I have had the opportunity to meet numerous American and European foreign policy experts, as well as scholars and pundits. During conferences and private meetings in the United States and Europe, we have held discussions, some heated, over Iran’s nuclear crisis. The questions have often be put to me, “Why did Iran hide its nuclear program if it was of a peaceful nature?” and “Why is Iran so adamant about pursuing its nuclear project despite suffering tremendous international pressure because of it?” Many conclude that the only logical explanation of Iran’s position is the desire to acquire the capability to build a nuclear bomb. This, they also argue, is the opinion shared by the US policy-makers.

In response to the first question, it had become clear that the West

sought to block Iran's nuclear development, and the only way that Iran could advance its technology was to go it alone, in private.

Shortly after the revolution, Iran canceled all of the Shah's ambitious nuclear programs. They also decided to cancel enrichment and reprocessing projects including the 23 nuclear power plants proposed by the US. They only maintained the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) which was supplied by the US in 1967, just for producing isotopes for medical purposes. Iran also intended to finish the Bushehr Power Plant, which was already 90 percent complete and for which Germany had already received about 8 billion DM. Iran planned to procure fuel from France through their joint venture contract, on which US\$1 billion had already been spent. However, after the revolution, France declined to provide fuel, terminated the nuclear cooperation between the two countries, and the joint venture company, Eurodif, was dissolved. So, at the time, Iran's plan was to outsource fuel, and had no plans to produce fuel inside the country.

From the mid-1980s to 1990s, I was involved in improving Iran–Europe relations. During this period, in more than 300 meetings, I asked German officials to complete the Bushehr Power Plant for which they had already been paid. I told them, “If you do not finish the work based on your contractual commitments, Iran would complete it in any way possible and have no choice but to go for self-sufficiency and even produce fuel (enrich uranium) domestically.” The Germans declined due to US pressure. The US also terminated all of its agreements with Iran, including the supply of fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor. The UK and other Western countries followed the US lead and terminated their nuclear agreements with Iran.⁵⁶

Argentina had signed a contract with Iran but then retracted it under American pressure. Finally, China was approached and a contract was drawn up and ratified, but, “when China joined the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 1992, it ceased nuclear cooperation with Iran under American pressure.”⁵⁷ Iran's only successful procurement of nuclear power came through Russia in 1993. The two countries signed a contract which was limited to restoring and completing the power plant in Bushehr.

As a result of these developments, the US and the West left Iran with no option other than to establish its own nuclear program. It was apparent that US offered little prospect of concessions negotiated on their program, and everywhere Iran turned for help, a US-created obstacle would emerge. The new US strategy of “no civilian nuclear power plant” and “no access to the international fuel market” for Iran

was a clear violation of the NPT. Under these circumstances, if Iran wanted to have such a program, its only way forward was through a clandestine nuclear project, hidden from the eyes of the international community. The US certainly wouldn't let it happen overtly. The bottom line is that it was the West who pushed Iran to develop its indigenous nuclear capability.

But *why* is Iran so adamant about having a nuclear capability? A quick review of the preceding developments reveals that after the revolution, Iran had no intention of mastering nuclear fuel cycle technology. As stated before, it canceled all of the ambitious plans drawn up between the Shah, the US and Western Europe. However, when the United States led the West in fierce opposition to Iran's intent to exercise its rights as stipulated in the NPT, then the problem was transformed from one of being denied access to certain technology, to one of being subject to bullying, humiliation, and blatant discrimination, tantamount to saying, "Any nation can exercise its rights under NPT to have a nuclear capability but you Iranians." Once it was clear that the US and the West intended to deal with Iran as third-class citizens of the international community, two major socio-psychological sentiments subsumed the dispute.

First was the culture of resistance. In the course of their long history, Iranians have been repeatedly invaded and defeated by "foreign enemies" including the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Turks, the Ottomans, the British, and the Russians. The consequence of those invasions and defeats is a deep sense of victimization. It is little wonder that Iranians often find themselves having to seek justice, act as combatants, and resist bullying and outside force and pressure.

Second, Iran's posture on the nuclear issue also stems from its strong, nationalistic sentiments, and this is arguably the program's driving force. For better or worse, it is well documented by numerous Western commentators who have visited Iran or have been in contact with Iranian society and culture, that Iranians are a proud people. This sentiment reflects their long civilization and cultural heritage. National pride is present throughout Iranian culture and discourse. Speeches and texts on Iranian identity repeatedly emphasize Iranian pride in its culture (*farhang*) and civilization (*tamaddon*).⁵⁸

Iran wants to be recognized as the regional power. Iran's nuclear program is a matter of national pride, with broad support from the population and their leaders. According to a Gallup survey conducted in November 2013, "Despite the perceived economic toll, two in three (68 percent) Iranians say their country should continue

to develop nuclear power despite the scale of sanctions against Iran. This higher support in the face of international pressure highlights the role Iranian nationalism plays in the nuclear standoff with the West.⁵⁹

This leads us to the most disputed issue—the question of uranium enrichment, and the reason why Iran is determined to have it. The answer lies in Iran's past experience in dealings with foreign countries over nuclear fuel. Those countries either imposed humiliating conditions before providing it, or they did not supply it at all. In other words, if Iran cannot enrich uranium locally, it has to rely on a limited number of countries who can supply enriched uranium. That leaves Iran vulnerable to the US, who might “pull the plug” at any time, thus preventing Iran from accessing the fuel market.

Finally, Iran's insistence on a nuclear program reflects a widely-held view in Iran that any compromise “under coercion,” such as suspending uranium enrichment under the pressure of sanctions, would open the door to more coercion and demands for concessions by the US. The highest levels of Iran's government believe that as soon as the US concludes that sanctions are working, they will question human rights issues and Iran's alleged sponsoring of terrorism in order to justify even more sanctions in pursuit of their primary goal: the toppling of the regime.

Since Iran's leadership believes that US strategy aims at regime change, such bullying and intimidation must be countered by Iran and the *nezam* making a resolute stand against the country's perceived enemy, taking not even one step back. Iran's staunch refusal to compromise on its nuclear activity while the country is under paralyzing sanctions is deeply rooted in these perceptions and beliefs.

The November 2013 Joint Action Plan signed by Iran and the P5+1 was a turning point. Together with the other world powers, the US agreed that the final “comprehensive solution would involve a mutually defined enrichment program with practical limits and transparency measures to ensure the peaceful nature of the program.”⁶⁰ In December of that year, President Obama remarked that demanding “no enrichment on Iranian soil” was unrealistic. He likened it to “a world in which Congress passed every one of my bills that I put forward.”⁶¹

Is there any Substance to American Suspicions?

Why does the US claim that Iran's intentions in pursuing its nuclear project are suspicious? Is there any validity to this US suspicion, or could it be that the US is using suspicion as a propaganda tactic to confront Iran? Actually, Iran did fail to report some nuclear activities. It also tried to conceal certain activities and dimensions of its nuclear program from the IAEA, which were subsequently discovered by inspectors from that organization. One such activity was the introduction of a limited amount of uranium hexafluoride gas to centrifuges at the Kalaye Electric Company in order to produce enriched uranium at a low, laboratory level.

Upon their discovery, the IAEA called on Tehran to confirm the introduction of gas to the centrifuges in question. Iran denied the accusation, but samples taken at the Kalaye Electric Company revealed that traces of enriched uranium existed at laboratory level in those installations. That episode, combined with Iran's denial of any nuclear testing, contributed to major international suspicion about the goals and nature of Tehran's nuclear programs. Suspicion was one of the most important factors in bolstering the hardline of the United States, and it led to the IAEA Board of Governors' strongly worded resolution in September 2003.

Later, the discovery of highly enriched uranium particles—which can be used to build an atomic bomb—at the Natanz installations caused grave concern in Tehran. An urgent meeting of the SNSC was called to discuss the matter, and reached the conclusion that since Iran had only carried out peaceful nuclear activities, the highly enriched uranium particles had been discovered must indicate a plot by Israeli or US intelligence services. But the IAEA diffused the situation when it concluded that the traces of highly enriched uranium could have been from second-hand centrifuges, contaminated prior to their importation to Iran from Pakistan.

However, there were other failures to report as well as contradictions in Iran's statements. In October 2003, right after Rouhani was appointed as Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Tehran decided to present a full report about its past and present nuclear activities, admitting that it had carried out some previously undeclared activities. Those highly controversial and previously undisclosed matters included accessing second generation, advanced P-2 centrifuges' drawings and producing polonium, which is a highly radioactive neutron source with some applications in military and non-military industries.⁶²

The installations at Natanz, which are generally recognized as Iran's

central facility for enrichment, have been at the heart of the controversy over Iran's nuclear program. The IAEA Director General, Mohamed ElBaradei, visited the Natanz site on February 21, 2003 and was surprised that 164 centrifuges were complete and ready for operation, with 1,000 more in production and assembly at the site. But was this a gross violation of the NPT? In fact it was not.

Based on the Safeguard Agreement of the NPT, member states are not obliged to report on the planning, construction, import, production, and assembly of centrifuges. According to the NPT, Iran was only obliged to report installations to the IAEA 180 days before the introduction of gas, that is, the commencement of introducing enriched uranium, to the centrifuges. It is understandable that the West was shocked when ElBaradei visited the enrichment site at Natanz and announced that Iran was among ten countries now in possession of enrichment technology, but that did not prove any violation of Iran's obligations under the NPT. No gas was introduced to the centrifuges and no enrichment was carried out at Natanz. Yes, Iran had concealed its activities, but had not violated the NPT. Having said that, the fact that such a huge installation was hidden from the eyes of the world made Americans very nervous.⁶³

It is noteworthy that the main concerns over Iran's nuclear program relate to past activities rather than current ones. Dennis Ross, a former senior American diplomat who was a top adviser on the Middle East to President Barack Obama remarked, "Only by coming clean to the IAEA about its past activities can Iran persuade the United States and other powers involved in nuclear negotiations that it doesn't intend to develop warheads in the future. They have to admit what they've done."⁶⁴ However, not only the IAEA but the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in 2007, and again in 2010, have confirmed that Iran does not have a nuclear weaponization program. Further, they found that no decision has been made by Iranian authorities to build a nuclear bomb.⁶⁵

Iran had its own logical reasons to covertly establish an enrichment program, but the concerns and suspicions of the US, based on some of Iran's past nuclear activities and its subsequent denials of such, are not totally without foundation. However, the policy of demanding no enrichment on Iranian soil is not one designed to remove mistrust. If Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons, it cannot do so overtly. Its recognized facilities are closely monitored by the IAEA and are the focus of international monitoring and attention. No country has ever developed nuclear weapons as a signatory to the NPT. (Mistakenly, some people refer to North Korea as an example to discredit this

argument—but North Korea withdrew from the NPT in January 2003 and carried out its first nuclear bomb test in October 2006.) And if Iran intends to develop or acquire atomic weapons covertly, a forced shutdown of the overt operations would offer no assurances to the US or anyone else that Iran would not attempt to do so outside of regulatory oversight. That is why Peter Jenkins, the former UK ambassador to the IAEA, said that “All talk of an ‘Iranian nuclear threat’ is therefore premature. Consequently, the draconian measures implemented by the US and its allies to avert that threat are unreasonable and unwarranted.”⁶⁶

American and Israeli Opposition to Iran’s Nuclear Program

Although there is an international consensus that Iran should not acquire a military nuclear capability, this movement is spearheaded by two countries: Israel and the United States. Israel argues that because Iran denies its existence, a nuclear-armed Iran poses an “existential threat” to the Jewish state.⁶⁷ Comments by some Iranians depicting Israel as a cancerous tumor which must be removed, and pledges to wipe Israel off the map, are used by Israel to portray the irrationality of the Iranian leadership and justify Israel’s policy on Iran’s nuclear program.⁶⁸

During my tenure of public office, I have always been opposed to the use of aggressive language, such as that often attributed to the former Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. I believe it is especially damaging in foreign relations, and even domestically, although it may appease rank-and-file conservatives. Ultimately, they would also pay the price as a result of hostile foreign relations with other states. In fact, my opposition to Ahmadinejad’s policies and approach cost me dearly. I will talk later about the espionage dossier fabricated by Ahmadinejad and his team, but now I feel want to focus on certain misinterpretations of facts that could bring the world to a disastrous war.

The Israeli argument outlined above is flawed in a number of ways. The statement that “Israel must be wiped off the map,” usually attributed to Ahmadinejad, was in fact never made. According to the Iranian presidential site, what he said was:

O dear Imam [Khomeini]! ... The *Zionist Regime* has lost its existence philosophy ... [and] faces a complete dead-end and under

God's grace your wish will soon be materialized and [it] will be wiped off the map.⁶⁹ (emphasis added)

Ahmadinejad did not refer to the people or the land of Israel, but to the regime. Many officials in the US and in Israel have, explicitly or implicitly, called for regime change in Iran; none meant that the Iranian nation should be annihilated. Moreover, Ahmadinejad did not say that he or Iran intend to do that. He hopes and expects that the Israeli regime will collapse. Confirm this interpretation, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor said in an interview, in April 2012, that Iran didn't say "we'll wipe it [Israel] out," but rather "it will not survive."⁷⁰

On this issue, Ayatollah Khamenei's view is that a referendum should determine what sort of regime should rule in the disputed land of Palestine/Israel:

We hold a fair and logical stance on the issue of Palestine. Several decades ago, Egyptian statesman Gamal Abdol Nasser, who was the most popular Arab personality, stated in his slogans that the Egyptians would throw the Jewish usurpers of Palestine into the sea. Some years later, Saddam Hussein, the most hated Arab figure, said that he would put half of the Palestinian land on fire. But we would not approve of either of these two remarks. We believe, according to our Islamic principles, that neither throwing the Jews into the sea nor putting the Palestinian land on fire is logical and reasonable.⁷¹

Israel's argument about Iranian irrationality is also flawed. Iran's rhetoric aside, Israel has never referred to or demonstrated objective and specific evidence or examples to prove the Iranian government's irrationality, at least in the way it is understood in the West. This is not to defend all the policies, actions, and/or approaches of the Iranian government, but reason requires that when Israel bases the argument about an "existential threat" on irrationality, they should support that argument with clear evidence in relation to the government of Iran. Indeed, the P5+1, which refers to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, who collectively represent the international community and are engaged in the nuclear talks with Iran think otherwise.

The sanctions imposed on Iran were clearly based on the assumption that the Iranian government is, in fact, rational. In a 2012 interview, President Obama was asked, "General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referred to the Iranian leadership as 'rational.' Where do you fall on this continuum?" Obama answered as follows:

I think it's entirely legitimate to say that this is a regime that does not share our worldview or our values. I do think, and this is what General Dempsey was probably referring to, that as we look at how they operate and the decisions they've made over the past three decades, that they care about the regime's survival. They're sensitive to the opinions of the people and they are troubled by the isolation that they're experiencing. They know, for example, that when these kinds of sanctions are applied, it puts a world of hurt on them. They are able to make decisions based on trying to avoid bad outcomes from their perspective.⁷²

Israel has not been able to back up its claims of irrationality on the part of the Iranian system, other than highlighting Iranians' rhetoric and slogans—sometimes misinterpreted—which are concocted for domestic consumption or as part of their policy of “threat against threat.”⁷³

Over the last two decades, Israel has constantly tried to convince the international community that Iran is seeking to build an atomic bomb. The following list illustrates Israel's assessment of Iran's nuclear program, intended to convince the world of Iran's threat to its existence:

- In October 1992, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres warned the international community that Iran would be armed with a nuclear bomb by 1999, reiterating that Iran was the greatest threat and problem in the Middle East because it sought the nuclear option.⁷⁴
- In 1995, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wrote in his book that Iran would possess a nuclear weapon in three to five years.⁷⁵
- In April 1996, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres claimed that Iran would have a nuclear bomb in four years.⁷⁶
- In November 1999, a senior Israeli military official said that the Islamic Republic would possess a nuclear capability within five years.⁷⁷
- In July 2001, Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer confirmed that Iran would have a nuclear bomb by the year 2005.⁷⁸
- In August 2003, a high-ranking military officer told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Iran would have the materials needed to make a nuclear bomb by 2004 and have an operative nuclear weapons program by 2005.⁷⁹

- In November 2009, General Yossi Baidatz, an Israeli military intelligence official, told an American defense official that “it would take Iran one year to obtain a nuclear weapon and two and a half years to build an arsenal of three weapons.”⁸⁰
- In September 2010, Jeffrey Goldberg said that Israeli officials believed that Iran was, at most, one to three years away from having a nuclear capability.⁸¹

In reality, the main source of Israel’s fear is that a nuclear-armed Iran will undermine its supremacy as the only nuclear power in the Middle East for several decades. Israel’s concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran could project its power and influence throughout the region without fear of confrontation by Israel. Iran could also support anti-Israel militant groups without fear of threats by Israel and even Israel’s closest ally, the United States. Finally, Israel is worried that a nuclear-armed Iran could destabilize and even shape new regimes in Arab countries to fall in line with its worldview, without fear of being confronted. Inevitably, such a development would make the Middle East environment more hostile and more dangerous for Israel.

Americans oppose Iran’s nuclear development from a different perspective. While Israel’s concerns are a major factor in US opposition, as is Israel’s influence on US grand strategy towards the Middle East, America is most concerned about energy resources in the region, which have security and economic significance for the US. This element has been paramount in the strategic thinking of the United States since at least the 1940s.

With regard to Iran’s threat to the existence of Israel, it seems contradictory that the US bases its policies—namely sanctions—on the rationality of Iran’s government, but also considers that Iran may falter in judgment and take a fatal risk as to attack Israel with an atomic bomb. Iran knows well that if it attacks Israel with an atomic bomb, not Israelis but Americans, would threaten the country existentially.⁸² Therefore, the overarching US concern cannot be the security of Israel, as widely espoused by US authorities, including President Obama.⁸³ Rather, it is the influence and power of pro-Israel forces that pushes American policy-makers to make such comments and bring the issue of Iran’s threat to Israel’s existence to the forefront of America’s foreign policy agenda with respect to Iran. Obama made an assessment of the situation in an interview during the 2014 AIPAC Policy Conference:

[I]f you look at Iranian behavior, they are strategic, and they're not impulsive. They have a worldview, and they see their interests, and they respond to costs and benefits. And that isn't to say that they aren't a theocracy that embraces all kinds of ideas that I find abhorrent, but they're not North Korea. They are a large, powerful country that sees itself as an important player on the world stage, and I do not think has a suicide wish, and can respond to incentives.⁸⁴

Energy is definitely a US national interest and also a matter of national security. Even today, with America's dependence on oil from the Persian Gulf sharply reduced, the region's strategic significance has not diminished. The reason is that any instability in oil supplies from the Gulf region affects oil prices globally. In other words, even if the US was entirely independent of the Gulf region's oil, any disruption in the supply of oil from that region would still affect oil prices in the global market, and thus affect the US economy.

The US economy, and indeed much of the world's economy, depends on the safe passage of ships through the Persian Gulf's waters.

America's fear is that once Iran is nuclear-armed it could assert itself as the dominant power in the Middle East and destabilize oil markets at will, simply by threatening Arab oil-producing countries in the region. Americans may also fear that a nuclear Iran could assist anti-American forces in the region with *no fear* of a US response. Another major US concern, as it is for Israel, is that America's Arab allies could be destabilized by Iran and their regimes toppled and reshaped through Iranian influence. An American foreign policy expert told me that the recent upheaval in the Arab countries and the collapse of US allies in the region like Mubarak in Egypt and Bin Ali in Tunisia, coupled with the complicated crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, have convinced the US of the need for a new policy in the Middle East. Moreover America's new security strategy is shifting towards Asia-Pacific area to contain China. As Hillary Clinton wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action."⁸⁵ Therefore it is possible that Washington is looking for détente with Iran, gradual withdrawal of its forces from the region, and a regional security system to be installed.

Another US worry is that Iran's acquisition of an atomic weapon might spark a nuclear arms race in the volatile Middle East. Some analysts argue that, because the countries in the Middle East that are

considered to be Iran's rivals are all pro-US allies, they will not seek to build an atomic bomb without US consent, but this is questionable. Pakistan was a close US ally and its army was heavily dependent on US aid when it built its nuclear weapon in 1998.

For the reasons cited, and in the absence of cooperative relationship with Tehran, Washington *is* concerned about Iran acquiring the capability to make atomic weapons. According to revelations by the *New York Times*, we now know that shortly after President Obama took office in 2009 he ordered the expedition of a wave of cyber attacks against Iran's Natanz nuclear facility.⁸⁶ This clearly shows that, right or wrong, the US perceives Iran's nuclear capability to be a threat to America's national interests and its security.

The nuclear issue became more crisis-laden during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He thought that by going on the offensive, Iran could push back the Americans. The first time that I learned about this drastic shift in Iran's policy was shortly after he took office in 2005. He invited me to a meeting and in that meeting he attacked the moderate policies of Mohammad Khatami and informed me that those policies were to be abandoned.

Why did Ayatollah Khamenei Accept Suspension?

On October 21, 2003, after several hours of talks, a joint agreement was announced at Tehran's Saadabad Palace between Iran, represented by Hassan Rouhani, the secretary of the Iranian SNSC, and the foreign ministers of the EU3: Jack Straw from the UK, Joschka Fischer from Germany, and Dominique de Villepin from France. In essence, Iran agreed to voluntary suspension of enrichment activities "as a confidence building measure" and to sign the so-called "Additional Protocol" to the NPT which would allow the IAEA to carry out surprise visits to suspect facilities. In return, Britain, France, and Germany pledged that they would "recognize the right of Iran to the peaceful use of nuclear energy," and that the additional protocol was in "no way intended to undermine the sovereignty, national dignity or national security" of Iran.⁸⁷

From the onset of the debates between Iran and the EU3 over Iran's nuclear issue, Iran argued that it made sense for the EU3 to request strict measures in order to achieve full transparency. However, transparency had nothing to do with suspension. Any measures, including short-notice and unannounced inspections were tolerable

if not reasonable, but it was incomprehensible why suspension should have been insisted on. Later, we learned that the Americans were not prepared to tolerate “a single centrifuge spinning in Iran,”⁸⁸ and it was this stance that forced the EU3 to insist on suspension. In fact, during the negotiations, Joschka Fischer told me that the EU3’s main aim was to engage with Iran and find a solution to the crisis, in effect, serving as a *human shield* to prevent an American or Israeli military strike.⁸⁹ ElBaradei’s memoir confirms that Straw and Fischer told him the same thing.⁹⁰

The debate on suspension was ongoing inside the Iranian government. We, as the negotiating team with the EU3, reasoned that as a goodwill, yet legally non-binding gesture, we should suspend enrichment activities temporarily, just to build confidence. Ayatollah Khamenei was reluctant to suspend enrichment. Our argument was that if we offered suspension and they still did not respect our rights, then we would have the upper hand. If we did not concede at least a temporary suspension, then we would lose our argument later in front of the international community. Led by Rouhani, the negotiating team ultimately convinced Ayatollah Khamenei to accept voluntary, legally non-binding suspension for a few months and the provisional imposition of the Additional Protocol of the NPT, which would allow intrusive inspections.

Subsequent to our agreement with the Europeans, Ayatollah Khamenei told government officials that “Iran has chosen a wise alternative to both preserve its nuclear technology and expose its nuclear activities to the world to refute false propaganda” launched by the Americans and Israelis.⁹¹

Following this concession, contact with the EU3 assumed a lower profile. We accepted suspension for a few months with hopes of fostering more mutually gratifying, permanent agreements.

It might appear in retrospect that negotiating with the EU3 foreign ministers and accepting suspension was an easy decision for Iran’s Leader to make. However, radicals, driven by their revolutionary ideology and an influential part of the Islamic Republic’s political structure, accused Khatami’s administration and the nuclear negotiating team of selling out on the nation’s pride and submitting to the will of the enemy. We also came under pressure from the security and intelligence community who were seriously concerned about the infiltration of foreign intelligence agents and spies among the IAEA inspectors.

Despite these objections, the Supreme Leader finally accepted the

Khatami team's plan, that is, suspension of the uranium enrichment activities aimed at confidence building and facilitating a permanent solution that would recognize Iran's right to enrich under the NPT. He said that allegations that the recent measure was an act of submission were not compatible with the realities of the situation, and emphasized that this was a political and diplomatic move that contained no element of submission.⁹²

Despite the name calling and attacks by our political opponents, the outcome of the Saadabad negotiations was a victory for Iran, and that was what really bothered our political rivals. Based on the Saadabad Agreement, Iran's right to nuclear technology was recognized and US efforts to have Iran's nuclear case referred to the UN Security Council (UNSC) were defeated. We believed that if the case were referred to the UN Security Council, then the US would succeed in procuring UNSC approval for sanctions against Iran. This is what ultimately happened during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The Saadabad negotiations also provide an insight on the process of decision-making in Iran. It has already been demonstrated that despite the Supreme Leader's authority over the government and the fact that he can veto government's decisions, in reality he must constantly balance the pressure of competing forces. In other words, his decisions are not immune from the realities of domestic political factions. Although in the beginning, Ayatollah Khamenei was told that suspension would last no longer than a few months, it was extended several times to 18 months in total. Every time the Europeans asked for an extension, the Supreme Leader reluctantly agreed at the request of the negotiating team and Khatami's reformist government.

Iraq 2003 and the US Miscalculation

The contemporary history of relations between the governments of Iran and Iraq until the fall of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein is littered with episodes of rivalry and a quest to establish dominance in the region. Long before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Shah of Iran viewed Saddam as his number one regional threat, and that remained the conventional wisdom in the aftermath of the revolution—particularly due to the war waged by Saddam's against Iran from 1980 to 1988. It was against this backdrop that the US invasion of Iraq occurred in 2003, toppling Saddam's regime.

Iran was shocked, disappointed, and felt scorned, after its gestures of goodwill in regional cooperation, to have been designated part of the axis of evil by the US. In these circumstances, it was obviously difficult for Iran to cooperate, directly or indirectly, with the US in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

There were three schools of thought in Iran on this issue. One school of thought was represented by the ultra-revolutionaries who argued that we should form a strategic alliance with Saddam against “Imperialism and Zionism” in the region, and beyond. They reasoned that Iran and Iraq possessed the most powerful Islamic armies and that by working together, and incorporating Syria in an alliance, there was great potential for defeating the US in the region. They argued that a US victory in Iraq would result in the creation of a puppet regime, the imposition of Western values, the stripping Iraq of its Islamic identity, and exploitation of its oil and natural resources. Put simply, they believed that Iran had to resist the “Global Arrogance” that aimed to invade an Islamic country.

The second school of thought was more pragmatic. Its advocates argued that if the US invasion was a success, American military bases would be set up in Iraq. Those bases, they asserted, would be used as a springboard for future attacks against Iran. They also made the point that in Afghanistan, Iran had cooperated in the interests of Afghanistan’s stability and security, but the US had not reciprocated—instead, matters had worsened. This school of thought questioned the rationale of providing similar assistance and cooperation again, this time to defeat Iraq.

The majority, including myself, bought into a third school of thought, arguing that Saddam did not have any grassroots support among his people and therefore would be toppled regardless of whether or not help was given. We argued that because of the religious and ethnic divisions within Iraqi society, the establishment of a stable government would be a very lengthy and complicated process. If the Americans declined to cooperate with Iran, they would be occupied there for years before the situation could be brought under control. We also pointed out that it was Saddam who had imposed war on Iran and Kuwait, inflicted a trillion dollars worth of damages on Iran, the region and his own country—causing the death of over a million people on both sides. Moreover, Saddam had no sincerity in his words or actions, as evidenced by his past record. Saddam employed belligerent rhetoric against the very countries with whom he had the best relations during the war, and from whom he received chemical weapons to use against

Iran's people and even his own. Indeed, this school of thought believed that we should not be blinded by Saddam's new rhetoric and super-radical, anti-American stance. Saddam was grasping for help because he was cornered by the West. We believed that he was extremely unreliable and unstable.

But the pillar of our argument was that US removal of Saddam meant the elimination of Iran's most lethal enemy, and because Shiites held the majority of the population, the emergence of a democracy leading to a Shia-dominated system in Iraq. Removing Saddam would pave the way to a more democratic country, which would strengthen the Shia population and give them a rightful place in Iraq's new government. Given our close relations with the opposition Shiite groups, Iraq's new government would most likely shift the balance of power in the region in our favor. And if the US cooperated with Iran, this would be welcomed as an important confidence-building move that could pave the way to further regional cooperation and rapprochement. But, if the US rejected a role for Iran in Iraq and continued isolating it, America would lose and *we* would benefit.

The fascinating thing was that Iranians and Americans were both considering the prospect of democratization in Iraq, but drawing two contrasting conclusions. Americans viewed democratization as a preamble to the fall of the Iranian Islamic system, while Iranians predominantly viewed it as a huge game changer in their favor. The chief reason that the US invaded Iraq was to strengthen its influence in and democratize Iraq in order to stimulate other regime changes, first in Iran, but more broadly throughout the Middle East.

Three weeks before the invasion, President George W. Bush described the "democratic domino theory" in which he wholeheartedly believed. Bush said that, "A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region."⁹³ But Tehran was suspicious about the "US democratic theory" because according to the democratic peace theory, *democracies never go to war with each other*, a point duly noted in President Bush's speech: "The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder."

Natan Sharansky, a Russian-born Israeli political activist, wrote a book entitled *The Case for Democracy*. The core thesis of this book is that democracy is the best insurance against aggression. His doctrine was so embraced by George W. Bush that in an interview with reporters, the president asked if they had read *The Case for Democracy*. "If you want a glimpse of how I think about foreign policy, read Natan

Sharansky's book. It will help explain a lot of the decisions that you'll see being made, you've seen made and will continue to see made," he remarked.⁹⁴

Iranians, however, believed that the US would only accept new democracies if those who came to power fell in line with US policies and helped secure Americans interests. They would argue that US opposition to democratically elected leaders such as Salvador Allende in Chile and Iran's Mohammad Mossadegh were clear cases in point. In addition, US support for past and present dictators from Latin America to the Middle East (including the Shah, Mubarak, and all the sheikhs in the Persian Gulf region) was another reason why Iranians were skeptical about America's commitment to the democratization project.

Paul Wolfowitz, then the US Deputy Defense Secretary and one of the architects of the Iraq invasion, also said that Iraq could be "the first Arab democracy" that would "cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, but across the whole Arab world."⁹⁵

However, we know that the democratic domino effect that the Bush administration expected did not change Iran's Islamic system, a system which incorporates a variety of democratic institutions quite alien to the systems of US Arab allies in the region. In fact, contrary to US expectations, Iran's influence in Iraq, and consequently in the region, became ever stronger over time. Americans miscalculated the outcome of their attack of Iraq by ignoring two major factors. First, they failed to realize the role and influence of Islam, and the way it had forged strong ties between the two societies. Iran, unlike Iraq, is not an Arab country but both are Shia dominated and have engaged in constant cultural exchange for the last 14 centuries. Iranian pilgrims go to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, home to sacred shrines of Shia Imams for the last 13 centuries. Imam Ali (p.b.u.h.)—the founder of what became the Shia movement—is buried in Najaf, while Karbala, 80 kilometers south of Baghdad, is the site of the death of the great Shia martyr Imam Hussein (p.b.u.h.), a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and the son of Imam Ali (p.b.u.h.).

Moreover, Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran are home to the two most important seminaries in the Shia world. Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's revolutionary leader, lectured in Najaf from 1964 to 1978. Top Shia leaders (*Marja-e Taqlid*), or "Sources of Emulation," whom Shiites, whether Iraqi or Iranian, have to follow, have constantly been on the move between the two countries. Presently, the highest ranking Shia *Marja*, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, lives in Najaf. Ayatollah Sistani,

82, was born in the holy city of Mashhad in Iran. Interestingly, after living for more than six decades in Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani still carries an Iranian passport.

Another indication of the connection between the two countries is the fact that many high-ranking Iranian officials in the post-revolution era are Iraq-born. These include Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former head of Iran's judiciary; Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's Foreign Minister from 2010 to 2013; Ali Larijani, chairman of the parliament since 2008; and Mohammadreza Naghdi, commander of the Basij paramilitary force. These deep religious and historical ties between Iran and Iraq have created a natural and mutual influence between the two countries, something American planners did not consider in calculating the consequences of its invasion of Iraq.

Second, the US ignored the political influence that Iran had gained in Iraq over the two decades preceding the US invasion. The only organized, well trained, and equipped opposition groups to Saddam that could play a stabilizing role in the post-Saddam era were the Iranian-backed, trained, and supported Shia political and militant groups. Iran had made a major investment in such groups, providing them with financial assistance, training, weapons, and accommodation. These facts, along with ideological commonalities, established a strong relationship between Iraqi Shiites and the Iranian *nezam*. Those groups included the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), with its militant branch, the Badr Brigade; the Islamic Dawa Party (Islamic Call Party); the Kurdish Barzani group (KDP); and even the Iraqi National Congress (INC), led by Ahmad Chalabi, who was also close to the American intelligence community and State Department. The INC had an office in Tehran through the 1990s and maintained close relations with Iran's intelligence apparatus. Indeed in the aftermath of America's invasion of Iraq, there were whispers in the corridors of power in Tehran that Iranian intelligence had used the INC to feed disinformation to the Americans regarding Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Ahmad Chalabi was the main source of this information and the closest figure to the US government among the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein.

To conclude, no country in the world, Arab or otherwise, had such a presence in Iraq as did Iran. Due to religious and historical relations, Iran and Iraq have mutual influence on each other. Thirteen hundred years of ideological exchanges with the Iraqi Shiite majority plus two decades of political and military relationships with the most powerful dissident currents in Iraq afforded Iran a unique position to exercise its

influence immediately after the backbone of the Ba'athist government was broken as a result of American-led invasion.

Among all responsible for foreign policy, nobody believed that Saddam's weapons of mass destruction were the real reason behind the US invasion of Iraq. The Iranian leadership and foreign policy apparatus, including those of us at the SNSC, firmly believed that oil was also a significant factor in the US decision. The invasion would release Iraq's oil production potential, otherwise impossible under Saddam's rule. His regime had faced draconian sanctions due to the fear that Iraq might develop military capacities that would threaten the region again after its two prior attacks, against Iran and then Kuwait. A pro-Western government and a free market economy would allow Iraq to increase its oil production and guarantee a steady supply of oil which would stabilize global oil markets, decrease (or, to some extent, control) oil prices, and also open the door to the Iraqi oil sector for American and European investors. Additionally, mega construction projects in relation to Iraq's infrastructure would provide American and European contractors with long-term, lucrative business. This was our assessment and understanding of what lay behind the US decision to attack Iraq.

As the war drums got louder, Tehran gave the green light to Iran-backed groups to cooperate with a US invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam. Major General Qasem Soleimani's constructive role on matters pertaining to Afghanistan in 2001, and then Iraq in 2003, was crucial in orchestrating Iran's strategy in the field.

After successfully cooperating in Afghanistan, Iraq was an incredible opportunity for the US and Iran to test cooperation on regional stability and security. However, mistrust and divergence soon replaced convergence and cooperation. Out of fear of Iran's influence in Iraq, the US assumed an aggressive posture to ensure that this influence would be diminished and ultimately negated in the post-Saddam Iraq. Iran responded by pushing to expand its influence through its existing ties to Iraq which it had invested in for over two decades. While increasing violence raged on in Iraq, Iran and the US blamed each other instead of cooperating against their common enemies: extremist groups, remnants of the Ba'athists, and Saddam's regime. This further increased tensions within the Iranian government, and cost those who favored rapprochement with America a great deal of political capital and reputation.

In retrospect, the US invasion of Iraq paradoxically advanced Iran's regional position by freeing the Shi'ite majority from Ba'athist rule. This irony was summed up by Iranian expert Vali Nasr: "The Shi'a ascendancy in Iraq is supported by and is in turn bolstering another

important development in the Middle East: the emergence of Iran as a regional power.”⁹⁶

Although Iran emerged as the winner from the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, these two regional cases hold the potential to become a new front of cooperation between Iran and the US which could be expanded to include the fight against Salafi extremists and terrorists in the whole region including Syria. While attending a conference on Afghanistan at Harvard, in spring 2013, an informed former US politician told me that a high-level US military commander had recently sent a message for Qasem Soleimani appreciating his cooperation in facilitating the safe departure of US soldiers from Iraq.

Iran’s Proposal: “Too Good to Be True?”

In late April 2003, a few weeks after the US invasion of Iraq, the SNSC received a draft outline of a road map for improving relations between Iran and the United States. The initiative was managed by Sadeq Kharrazi, Iran’s ambassador to France, in cooperation with Tim Guldemann, the Swiss ambassador to Tehran. Since May 1980, Iran–US relations had been severed and the Swiss Embassy in Tehran acted as the protecting power of the US in Iran. According to my information, Guldemann had initiated the new effort. After the initial draft was prepared by Kharrazi and Guldemann, it was given to Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi. Kharrazi then invited his top diplomats, such as Javad Zarif, Iran’s ambassador to the UN, to assist in editing the draft⁹⁷ and crafting the final version.

The draft presented an outline of the aims and expectations of each of the two governments, and it identified three steps required for the two sides to reach a grand bargain.⁹⁸ In essence, the proposal was a peace treaty to end hostilities between the two states. Iran would address US concerns with respect to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, Iran’s opposition to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and Hezbollah of Lebanon. In exchange, the US would end its hostility towards Iran by lifting sanctions and abandoning its quest for regime change. The totally unprecedented part of the proposal was the focus on Iran’s position on the peace process and Arab-Israeli conflict, which had been very much in line with other Muslim states and members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

On May 4, 2003, Tim Guldemann attached a cover letter⁹⁹ to the proposal and faxed it to the US State Department.¹⁰⁰ Apparently

trying hard to convince the Americans that the deal was authentic, Guldimmann quoted Sadeq Kharrazi as saying, "The leader uttered some reservations as [to] some points ... [but] they [meaning above all, the Leader] agree with 85% to 90% of the paper." According to Guldimmann, Kharrazi added, "But everything can be negotiated." I have some reservations about these statements. Despite Guldimmann's assertion, it is unlikely that "they," that is, the Supreme Leader, had seen the draft.

The draft was discussed in the Foreign Ministry. The Secretariat of the SNSC and the President were informed. According to the discussions I had, Khatami, Rouhani, and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi all strongly believed that as long as there was no willingness on the part of the United States to respond positively to the "road map," we should not make it an official proposal and offer it to Ayatollah Khamenei. Time and time again, he had accused all of us of being naïve about the American government's true intentions towards Iran, which he perceived to be regime change.

We all knew that if Ayatollah Khamenei was made aware of the proposal, his reaction would be, "How are you sure the US is ready to positively respond to such an offer? By doing this you will most likely gain nothing. Americans will reject this overture, publicize it, and humiliate you, again." He was conscious of the efforts we had made in relation to the release the hostages in Lebanon in 1988–9, and also our cooperation with the Americans in Afghanistan. He cited the latter experience every time anyone suggested the notion of rapprochement. Khatami argued that a "grand deal" proposal should only be presented to the Supreme Leader if the Americans were receptive and indicated interest in such an initiative. There was also a consensus among us that since the proposal was unofficial, we could always deny its authenticity if the Americans publicized it and attempted to humiliate us.

I met Sadeq Kharrazi on April 23, 2014 in New York. He has been struggling with cancer for the last two years. He had his 11th surgery in New York to treat his cancer. I reviewed with him my take on the 2003 proposal. "I was authorized by Tehran. Tim [Guldimmann] sent me the first draft. We made some changes. I sent it to my contact in the US State Department. We exchanged the draft two or three times with the State Department. However, the State Department never responded to the final draft. Therefore there was no need to raise the issue with the Leader," Sadeq told me in New York.

Richard Armitage, the US Deputy Secretary of State, was one of the influential people in the White House who rejected and buried the offer. His rationale, as explained in an interview, was that, "It didn't fit

with some of the other things ... that we'd been hearing from Iran."¹⁰¹ When asked to elaborate, he responded:

After the terrible devastation of the earthquake in Bam [in December 2003] ... completely as a humanitarian and not as a political matter [we offered the Iranian government] assistance and earthquake relief [but we got no signal]. If there had been a desire on the Iranian side to seek a better relationship, it would have been an ideal time afterward to send that signal.

Let us examine the facts. The US earthquake relief was offered in December 2003, so it was only a few months after the US rejected Iran's aforementioned, unprecedented offer for peace. Why would Iran have thought that the relief offer was intended as an overture? Also, on behalf of the US administration, Armitage offered relief but at the same time emphasized that it was completely humanitarian in nature. He explicitly stated that it had nothing to do with politics. To place Armitage's words in the context of 2003, the US administration was clearly saying, "Despite our offer of humanitarian assistance, we are not interested in changing the political status quo." Considered together, and in relation to the circumstances of Iran's natural disaster, it is hard to fathom that Armitage expected Iran to send another positive signal aimed at better relations.

Some commentators¹⁰² question the validity of the proposal based on the fact that in 2003, Iran's UN ambassador, Javad Zarif, had met with US diplomats Zalmay Khalilzad and Ryan Crocker in Paris and Geneva but had never raised the issue of Iran's readiness for all-encompassing peace negotiations with the US. They also emphasize the fact that Khalilzad had met Zarif the day before Guldemann delivered the grand bargain fax. They ask, "Why didn't Zarif say a word about Iran's offer to Khalilzad?" But the answer is obvious: Switzerland was the initiator and mediator and the case should have been followed through them. Opening a new and parallel channel would disappoint the Swiss and later they could blame us for bypassing them and undermining their efforts.

Also, at that time we were seeking a normalization of relations with Europe. However, the Iran–US conflict was a major obstacle in that respect. Europeans constantly blamed us for taking an uncompromising stance towards improving relations with the US. It was critically important for us to demonstrate to them that we were ready to deal with all the issues in dispute between Iran and the US, and that if

there was an obstacle, it was not put there by Iran. Switzerland, as the protector of US interests in Iran, was perfectly placed to act as witness to Iran's reconciliation efforts and to provide an objective judgment on the whole process to the European community.

Furthermore, nobody in Khatami's administration was mandated or authorized to talk directly to the Americans about restoring relations. After the big failure with Afghanistan, the Khatami administration scoffed at such a broad proposal for cooperation through any direct channel because they were highly unsure about its outcome. The administration did not trust the Americans and felt it was a real possibility that the US might use the proposal against us by leaking it to the media. The Khatami administration wanted to leave room for denial in case the overture was revealed. Also, Zalmay Khalilzad, a staunch neoconservative who was fundamentally against the Iranian system, would not have been the right channel, even if the Iranians had wanted to make such a significant offer directly.

Some notable commentators have speculated that this offer of a grand bargain so soon after the US attack on Iraq arose out of fear that Iran would also be attacked.¹⁰³ This scenario of US threat and intimidation policies impacting decisions made by the Iranian government is one of the major misperceptions that has helped produce the situation we witness today in Iran-US relations. Those who credit such a scenario should reconsider the fact that Iran cooperated with the US on the war on terror in Afghanistan in 2001 while there was no threat of an attack on Iran. The idea that Iran's decisions can be influenced by issuing threats is also embraced by the US with respect to Iran's nuclear situation.

As someone who has been involved with the foreign policy apparatus of Iran, I can offer assurance that US threats have never been *the key* factor in Iran's foreign policy decision-making, while, of course, they are never totally ignored. The reason is clear. The main goal of Iran's political system is to be independent from other world powers, particularly the United States. This was the central slogan of the revolution and still remains the system's primary goal.

While nationalistic motivation, which has deep roots in Iranian culture, has to be considered in any analysis of Iran's foreign policy decision-making, this sentiment of independence is important because of its links to the Islamic nature of the system. If the system bowed to American pressure or threats, it would be difficult to hold its foundations in place, as these are based on Islamic values. In other words, if the Iranian government were to make decisions out of fear created

by US threats, it would have to continually appease them to prevent further threats. By doing so, the Islamic government would lose not only its independence, but also its identity.

Moreover, given that Iran's proposal occurred a few weeks after the US invasion of Iraq, we were convinced that the US could not attack Iran while Iraq was in chaos and without a stable, central government. An attack on Iran would critically complicate and jeopardize the stabilization process in Iraq. So, offering the grand bargain proposal at that juncture would not have been due to fear of a US attack.

Finally, the real reason why Bush's administration rejected the proposal was *not* because it was "too good to be true," as US officials maintained.¹⁰⁴ Common sense dictates that sending a positive signal would have easily verified the proposal's authenticity. Based on our assessment, the true reason that the offer was spurned was that the neoconservatives, led by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, sought regime change in Iran and did not *want* any solution to the Iran-US problem. At the same time, their swift victory in Iraq had made the Americans overconfident, and their expectation was that it would not take long before, with a little bit of a push from outside, the democratic domino theory would take effect and claim Iran's government.

The perplexing nature of the relationship between Iran and the US manifested itself once again in the spring of 2004. Hassan Rouhani recounted the following story to me:

After a visit to Washington, ElBaradei, the Head of the IAEA, called me. He said, "I need to see you immediately." Within a couple of days, he was in Tehran. I thought he conveyed a message from Washington with regard to the nuclear issue. But he divulged to me that he wanted to speak privately about an important issue. In the meeting, he confessed, "I was in Washington a few days ago. I met with George Bush. I told him, 'Why don't you talk directly with the Iranians and together find a solution to this nuclear dilemma?' Bush replied, 'Why just the nuclear issue? Why not talk about all issues disputed between the two countries and solve them all at once? I propose that someone with full authority come from Tehran, sit with me personally, negotiate, and find a blanket solution to all mutual problems.'" ElBaradei maintained that it was an excellent opportunity now that [the] Americans have volunteered to reconcile.

There was no need to hear how the story ended. At that point, I knew Iran's Supreme Leader had put on hold any such talks and negotiations. The wounds of humiliation had not yet been healed.

The history of relations between Iran and the United States is full of similar disappointments. When Iran was ready to reconcile, the US was not, and when the US stretched out its hands, Iran would step back. Chances were missed, one after another.

I was Right and John Sawers was Not

Between the announcement of the Saadabad Agreement in October 2003 and October 2004, a full year, Iran carried on substantive negotiations heavily with the EU3 and also the IAEA while uranium enrichment was halted. These negotiations were intended to reach a long-term agreement within the framework of which, under the NPT regulations and inspections, Iran could run the full cycle of a peaceful nuclear project.

Our nuclear negotiation team was under pressure from two sides. The Europeans demanded that uranium enrichment suspension should be extended for a longer term while the US insisted on an indefinite halt. On the other hand, the Iranian leadership was growing impatient and pushed us to bring the open-ended process to its conclusion.

The whole time negotiations were taking place, we sought to use the nuclear issue as leverage towards a major settlement with the West. We hoped that a nuclear agreement would ultimately prepare the ground for better relations with the West, including United States. In October 2004, I said in an interview:

Besides inviting the West's main exporters of nuclear plants to take a "substantial part" in Iran's nuclear projects, Tehran is also ready to offer them a "golden package" that would include full cooperation in fighting international terrorism and restoring peace and security in the region, as well as in trade and investment.¹⁰⁵

In November 2004, the so-called Paris Agreement was made between Iran and the EU3. The negotiations that led to this outcome were amongst the toughest that I ever experienced during my career. And that career had encompassed the posts of General Director for Relations with the EU and ambassador to Germany, when I had been

involved in highly sensitive talks covering the Salman Rushdie affair, the largest ever humanitarian exchange between Hezbollah and Israel, the release of European and American hostages in Lebanon, and also Iran–US cooperation to overthrow the Taliban, to name a few.

In Paris, the two sides agreed to form three working groups to negotiate for three months on finding a framework within which Iran would provide “objective guarantees” regarding non-diversion from peaceful nuclear activities. In exchange, the EU would respect the rights of Iran to peaceful nuclear technology under the NPT. Additionally, the EU would commit to long-term strategic political, economic, and security cooperation with Iran. Again, the agreement would emphasize that enrichment suspension was temporary, voluntary, non-legally binding, a confidence-building measure to last for the period covered by the working group negotiations, that is, three months. Happy and satisfied after finalizing the Paris agreement, the nuclear team went to Vienna to participate in an IAEA Board of Governors’ session. While we were there, shocking news came from Tehran—Ayatollah Khamenei had rejected the agreement.

While we were all in a state of shock, Khatami, Rouhani, and Rafsanjani rushed to meet with the Supreme Leader. Dr. Rouhani explained the tasks of the three Paris working groups (nuclear, economic, and political) to the Leader. He told Ayatollah Khamenei that after reaching a long-term agreement in three months, Iran’s file at the IAEA would be normalized, Iran would be able to start the enrichment process, having been given the necessary permission with all assurances on non-diversion, and a new era of relations between Iran and the EU would commence.

Thanks to Rafsanjani’s mediation, Ayatollah Khamenei indicated that he would accept the framework of the Paris settlement, but with one condition: suspension should not last more than three months. We informed the Europeans about the developments in Tehran. Under this arrangement, the end of that three-month period would mark 15 months since the Saadabad Agreement and the beginning of the enrichment suspension.

During the following months, we argued that implementation of the NPT safeguards, Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1, and additional protocols¹⁰⁶ should be sufficient as “objective guarantees” that Iran would not divert its nuclear program from civil purposes to one of a military nature. There are no international regulations on the transparency of a nuclear program of a member state of NPT beyond three measures just referred to, but the Europeans seemed to lack

the authority and confidence to accept this offer, which to all intents and purposes would have recognized Iran's right to possess nuclear technology. What was the obstacle? The United States. Later, in 2006, when he was no longer in charge of the nuclear negotiating team, Dr. Rouhani told me that Joschka Fisher, former German Foreign Minister, had told him that "[the] EU3 and Iran could have reached a compromise but the United States prevented it from happening."

By March 2005, the talks came to almost a complete halt. On May 25, Rouhani met in Geneva with foreign ministers of the EU3—the last chance to save the talks. The Europeans asked for three more months to come up with their final offer. After the negotiating team came back to Tehran and after intense deliberations, it was decided to respond with another two-month extension. I notified the EU3 ambassadors of Iran's final decision.

Knowing the atmosphere in Tehran, and with the aim of convincing the Europeans that it was the last chance, I planned an unofficial visit to the three European capitals to talk to my German, French, and British interlocutors. I first met my German counterpart, Michael Schaefer, on a Sunday, in a Berlin pizzeria. During a three-hour meeting, I told him that Iran would never compromise on its legitimate right to a uranium enrichment program and that no change should be expected in Iran's position after the upcoming Iranian elections, which were supposed to be held in June 2005. I also pointed out that regardless of who the next president might be, Iran would restart its uranium enrichment activities if the present negotiations failed.

Unofficially, I disclosed to Schaefer a proposal to escape a possible crisis and save the talks. The Isfahan uranium conversion facility, at which yellowcake (uranium concentrate powder) is converted into uranium hexafluoride (which is then introduced to centrifuges at the Natanz facility for the purpose of enrichment), would restart its processing but would export its output to South Africa and in return, import an equivalent amount of yellow cake from South Africa. The Natanz enrichment facility would restart, but only work at the level of a pilot plant. Meanwhile, negotiations could continue for a maximum of one year, allowing both sides to secure objective guarantees that would ensure Iran's non-diversion towards nuclear weaponization in exchange for guarantees of nuclear, technological, and economic cooperation between Iran and the EU3. Schaefer was receptive to my proposal, and encouraged me to talk to Paris and London.

The next day, I was in Paris. Sadeq Kharrazi, the Iranian ambassador to France, joined me in my talks with the French Foreign Ministry's

Political Director, Stanislas Lefebvre de Laboulaye. After repeating what I had told my German counterpart, I perceived his position to be lukewarm. Between the lines, what I read was, “If London accepts the plan, we would too.” So, everything ultimately depended upon the outcome of my discussions with the British Foreign Office. The UK negotiator was none other than Sir John Sawers, then Director General for Political Affairs at the Foreign Office and later head of MI6.

I heard the news about his appointment as head of the MI6 in 2009. I was shocked—and had a sudden flashback of a number of episodes. Of all the European negotiators, Sawers was the one who appeared most determined to achieve a long term suspension of the enrichment program. I recalled at least three or four occasions when the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, showed signs of flexibility and seemed ready to compromise, but would suddenly reverse his position and become as rigid as a rock after Sawers whispered something in his ear. These flashbacks, coupled with the news of his appointment as MI6 supremo, led me to believe that in reality Sawers was more than a Director General during the negotiations. After a few meetings with the EU3 ministers or their teams over the 2003–5 period, Dr. Rouhani remarked more than once to me: “Hossein! John Sawers is extremely mysterious with a complicated personality [*pichideh*], and is the most influential in EU3’s team.”

In any event, I endured a tough, two-hour meeting with John Sawers. He told me point blank that Washington would not tolerate even one centrifuge spinning in Iran, and added that my proposal about letting a pilot plant operate in Natanz would not make much difference: “Don’t forget that we [British] built an atomic bomb with only 16 centrifuges running.” However, he also indicated that he was prepared to talk further after the Iranian elections. Once again, the delaying tactic was in play.

I told him, “Listen, John. *Nezam* has made its decision. There will be no more extension after the two-month period is over. Iran will start enrichment even at the cost of war.” He replied that if Iran restarted enrichment, then we should expect a US attack. When I said goodbye that day, I felt that Sawers thought I was bluffing. Interestingly, I also thought that by threatening a US attack, he was bluffing. What transpired after that spring day in 2005 showed that he was indeed bluffing and that I was not. Again, however, an opportunity had been missed.

Fast forward two months: Iran had a new president and a sea change was under way. The EU3 ambassadors in Tehran delivered the EU3

package in early August 2005. Subsequent to that, I met with them at my SNSC office in Tehran. I quickly reviewed the package, and it is fair to say that it was attractive from a political, economic, technological, and even nuclear cooperation perspective. However, all the positive content was undone by the fact that it again sought “suspension of uranium enrichment for the period of negotiations.” I was totally deflated. Looking at the three ambassadors, I asked, “Can you tell me if we can decide together and specify a period for the negotiations?” They looked at each other, paused for a while, and finally Richard Dalton, the UK ambassador replied, “Unfortunately not.”

Dalton’s reply was hesitant, seeming to confirm my own observation that his personal position was different from John Sawers—Dalton was far more realistic than his bosses in London. I followed up by asking, “So does it mean that it can be one year, three years, five years?” Dalton replied, “Perhaps ten years would be needed for negotiations to build confidence.” I then asked, “Should I convey to the higher authorities that the EU3 is asking for indefinite suspension?” They confirmed this to be the case, and I observed, “If this is the EU position, then our good time is over. Tehran will restart enrichment regardless of the consequences; be it referral to the UN Security Council, imposing sanctions, or even war.”

I was sure that the three ambassadors did not agree with their superiors and had sympathy toward my view. During a private meeting in summer 2005, François Nicoullaud, a good friend of mine and then the French ambassador in Tehran, told me, “The EU3 is more flexible but for the US, the enrichment in Iran is a red line which the EU cannot cross.”¹⁰⁷ In the end, due to the US position of “no enrichment in Iran,” Ayatollah Khamenei instructed Rouhani to restart Isfahan nuclear facility. The talks collapsed and thus began the tumultuous years in Iran–US relations.

Chapter 6

SIXTEEN YEARS OF MODERATION COME TO AN END 2005–12

Emergence of the Principlists

Ahmadinejad came to power in August 2005 at a time when negotiations between the EU3 and Iran, under the presidency of Khatami, had almost hit a dead end. Further complicating matters, there were no more individuals like Khatami, Rouhani, and Rafsanjani to simultaneously negotiate with the Supreme Leader and the West in pursuit of a halfway solution. For the first time in the Islamic Republic's history, the parliament, judiciary, executive, military, and security and intelligence establishments were all in the hands of conservatives, known in Iran as *Principlists*.

Although there were two distinct factions, one more moderate than the other, within this camp, the dominant one shared the Supreme Leader's level of mistrust of the West. However, this faction also believed that the antagonism that existed between the Islamic Republic and the West had its origin deep in their respective natures and world-views, and so, reasoned that it would be impossible to secure Iran's right to carry out enrichment using only negotiation. They argued that the only way forward was to resist the bullying policies of the West and adopt an aggressive stance until the West recognized Iran's rights and retreated. As a result, Iran's position dramatically shifted to one of non-compromise and inflexibility.

Ahmadinejad won the election by campaigning for social and economic justice, and war against corruption. He promised that he would bring the corrupt mafia that monopolized power and wealth to justice, yet many of the greatest corruption scandals in the history of the Islamic Republic, involving businessmen and a group of governmental bankers, were discovered during Ahmadinejad's term. However, he used this approach—promising to fight corruption—to buy popularity and marginalize his opponents: specifically, the moderates and reformists.

In July 2005, the office of then-president-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called and invited me to meet with him. I hardly knew him, having met only once at an informal occasion years earlier. On July 19, 2005 at 5.00 p.m., I met the new president in his temporary office. The meeting was scheduled for 20 minutes but ran for more than two hours. Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh, Ahmadinejad's close friend and confidant, was also at the meeting. My encounter with Ahmadinejad shed light on the profound differences ahead between him, the representative of the Principlists, and the moderate current within Iran's establishment that his administration was about to replace.

Ahmadinejad wore slippers and no jacket. As I entered his office he hugged me and greeted me by my first name. "How are you doing, Hossein Agha [Mr. Hossein]? Have you had lunch?" I told him that I had already had lunch. He went to his desk, grabbed a handful of pistachios, and said, "This is my lunch."

Without wasting time, Ahmadinejad went on, "You know, I view your approach [to the nuclear issue] as problematic. Why do you negotiate for your rights? Uranium enrichment is our legal right. Negotiation [over our given rights] does not make any sense." I replied:

It is true that uranium enrichment, within the framework of the NPT, is our right but in order to implement the treaty, the international community has created the IAEA. Within the IAEA, the Board of Governors which represents the member states has the role of policy-making. Their decisions are binding for the members and signatories, including Iran. Now, the Board of Governors has passed a resolution demanding Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program. We have a choice, either abide by the rules and suspend Iran's enrichment program temporarily and restart after we reach an agreement with the world powers, or defy. In choosing the latter, Iran's nuclear dossier will be referred to the UN Security Council and we will face international sanctions.

Ahmadinejad was fiercely opposed to my argument. He declared, "The IAEA does not have the right [to refer Iran's nuclear case to the UNSC]. These are all bluffs to frighten you." With criticism in his voice and expression, he asked, "Why have you chosen to talk to the Europeans anyway?" I responded:

We are talking with Europe, Russia, China and members of Non-Aligned Movement. We would have preferred to include the

United States as the key player but at that juncture that was a red line and the administration was forbidden from holding discussions with the US. Therefore, we chose the Europeans because first, they are a powerful bloc; second, to prevent referral of our case to the UNSC; and third, by improving our relations with Europe, we sought a channel to détente with the US.

Ahmadinejad would not give way. “America and Europe cannot do a damn thing,” he asserted, and added, “We should continue enrichment and not be frightened by the West’s bluffs.”

I described for him the likely consequences of acting on his stated position. I told him that the case *would be* referred to the UNSC and that this was not a bluff. I told him that Iran’s nuclear program would be categorized as a threat to the world’s security under Chapter 7 of the Charter of the United Nations, and added that, “In that case, Iran would be subject to punishment including imposition of sanctions and even military action.” Ahmadinejad was not daunted: “Neither America, nor the UNSC can do a damn thing. You committed suicide for fear of death [during Khatami’s presidency].”

After two fruitless hours of argument, I was still unclear as to why I had been invited to that meeting. Finally, he said, “The reason I asked you to meet with me is that I have five candidates in mind for the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ position. You are the first one I decided to talk to. Mojtaba [Hashemi Samareh] told me that you have been our best ambassador since the revolution.” I thanked him and Mojtaba for their generosity but declined the offer. “We have been talking about Iran’s foreign policy for two hours and we haven’t had a single common view on any issue,” I said. “Also, I come from a wealthy family. You campaigned as a president for the poor, having been raised in a disadvantaged family yourself. But I have no idea about their pain and suffering. I am not suitable for your cabinet.” Ahmadinejad insisted that we could work with each other but I already knew that was impossible. By the time I left, it was clear that no goodwill existed between us.

From Ahmadinejad’s office, I went directly to Rouhani’s office. As soon as I saw him, I told him that Iran’s foreign policy was going to face dramatic changes, in fact that foreign relations would soon be turned upside down. Neither of us would be able to work with the new president. We should resign. The next day, we left Tehran for London to participate in a farewell meeting with our EU3 counterparts. It was a bitter day, knowing that this meeting represented the end of 16 years of efforts under Rafsanjani and Khatami to reduce tensions with the West.

Rouhani met Ahmadinejad on August 9, 2005. After his meeting, Rouhani told me that he had cautioned Ahmadinejad about the potential consequences if Iran's nuclear file was referred to the UNSC. He had told the president that a major share of the IAEA's budget was provided by the Western countries and therefore they controlled the outcome of decisions made by the IAEA. Ahmadinejad responded to that point by saying, "Call ElBaradei right now and tell him Iran will pay the IAEA's full budget!"

Rouhani was stunned. He told Ahmadinejad, "First of all, such a decision has to go through the *Majlis* and, secondly, international organizations have their own rules and structures. Iran cannot individually dictate such matters." Rouhani told me that Ahmadinejad fired back in an angry tone, "I am instructing you and you should obey." But Rouhani's patience was at an end. He responded, "You should nominate another person to follow such instructions. I resign as of now." And he did. Rouhani resigned as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and the head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team on August 20, 2005. It was plain to see that Iran's foreign policy, particularly with respect to the nuclear issue, would change from one of engagement and cooperation to one of confrontation and disagreement.

Ali Larijani, who later became the chairman of the parliament, was chosen to replace Rouhani. Soon after his appointment, he invited me to meet with him. Larijani insisted on offering me a position. We had worked together in the SNSC during the Rouhani period, and I now agreed work with him in the capacity of "Foreign Policy Advisor."

During Hassan Rouhani's tenure as secretary of the SNSC, we had two red lines with regard to the nuclear issue. First, we insisted on recognition of our rights under the NPT, and second, we sought to avoid referral of Iran's nuclear file to the UNSC. In the first meeting after Larijani's appointment as the new secretary I met with a group of individuals, the majority of whom I did not know. In that meeting, after deliberations, Larijani concluded the meeting by saying that the new nuclear policy would abandon the strategy of "two red lines" and assume only one, our nuclear rights under the NPT. The reason for such decision was first their deep mistrust toward the West and second their disappointment on two years of negotiations with EU3. As the meeting continued, I wrote a note to Larijani:

By adopting such a strategy, Iran's nuclear file will definitely be referred to the UNSC and a perfect storm targeting Iran is in the

making. I don't want to be part of this historical shame. Therefore, I will not participate in nuclear meetings any more but in case you want to consult with me I will be at your disposal.

Ten years of confidence-building efforts with the West, several agreements on mutual economic and political cooperation with the Europeans, and preparation of the ground for joining the World Trade Organization went out the window, practically overnight.

Following these developments, Rouhani became the head of the Center for Strategic Research, which worked under the auspices of the Expediency Discernment Council, headed by Rafsanjani. The center is a consultative arm of the Expediency Discernment Council, as well as the Supreme Leader. The Expediency Discernment Council, whose members are chosen by the Supreme Leader every five years (39 members as of 2013), was originally set up to resolve the differences between the *Majlis* and the Guardian Council. Over time, it assumed the role of an advisory body to the Supreme Leader. In September 2005, Rouhani appointed me as his deputy for international affairs. I worked in that position until I was arrested in April 2007.

Hardliners' Arguments against the Moderates

By 2005, the moderates and reformists became almost completely irrelevant, and the so-called Principlists, now dominated all branches of government. During the 16 years of their tenure (1989–2005), moderates under Rafsanjani and reformers under Khatami had sought to resolve the conflict with the West, despite unyielding opposition and sabotage by the conservatives. Regrettably, the United States increased sanctions and toughened its stance toward Iran without regard for the rapprochement efforts made by the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations.

The Principlists argued that Khatami's conciliatory policies begat increasingly aggressive behavior by the United States under President George W. Bush. They insisted that Europe would follow America, the difference being that Europe wanted to sell their products, but sought no serious or long-term political relationship with, or economic investment in, Iran. The Principlists also argued that while the US supported and maintained warm relations with dictatorships across the region, which had never held a single election in their history, it labeled

Iran as undemocratic—this despite Iran’s political system being clearly more similar to that of Western democracies.

The Principlists specifically questioned the outcome of Khatami’s conciliatory policies, which they perceived to be more pressure and humiliation for the nation during the nuclear negotiations. They argued that while Iran accepted every international convention related to the non-proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, it continued to be accused of their breach. The US accused Iran of developing weapons of mass destruction and even worse, had supported Saddam while he had engaged in the most inhumane chemical attacks against Iranians. Principlists pointed out that even though Pakistan and India had not signed the NPT *but had* developed atomic bombs, they were not subject to any sanctions or pressure by the West. On the other hand, Iran had cooperated with the West for 20 consecutive months between 2003 and 2005 and even opened some of its military facilities to the IAEA inspectors, which was not required under the NPT. And “although the IAEA repeatedly reported a lack of evidence of any military diversion in Iran’s nuclear program, the EU3 had demanded that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program in August 2005. So, what was the point of your cooperative policies and what did you gain, other than another humiliation?” the Principlists asked us.

Conservative Principlists used these arguments to attack moderates and marginalize them to the point that by 2005, they were almost entirely driven off of the political stage in Iran. The conservatives turned Iran’s foreign policy around 180 degrees by ignoring Western demands and those of the international institutions. The conservatives’ rationale was that by defying the demands of the West, and the US in particular, Iran’s opponents would eventually be forced to accept Iran’s position on the nuclear issue and recognize our rights. Conservatives in Iran also believed that this approach would yield another significant benefit, arguing that if Iran were to spearhead resistance against the US and become aggressive on the question of Israel, ordinary Muslims across the Islamic world would rally to its support. This, they believed, would place Iran in a stronger position in relation to the United States in the Middle East region and significantly increase the cost of any likely Western military action against Iran.

Iran Goes on the Offensive

Ahmadinejad was determined from the very beginning of his term to alter the trajectory of Iran's conciliatory efforts with the West. Before he took office, the reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, had worked closely with his secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rouhani. But in 2007, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs drafted a paper¹ that attacked the conciliatory nature of Iran's "critical dialogue" with the West under President Hashemi Rafsanjani's direction between 1989 and 1997. The paper proclaimed a change in strategy in Iran's foreign policy position, from "the accused [who has to convince the accuser of not being guilty] to the accuser." In effect, with this paper, Ahmadinejad announced to the world that Iran now subscribed to the notion of, "the best defense is a strong offense."

And Ahmadinejad *did* go on the offensive, with a verbal attack on the credibility of mainstream historical accounts of the Holocaust. His team believed that by raising doubts about the accuracy of conventional wisdom on the Holocaust—such a significant and emotional issue in both Israel and the US—they might also encourage the world to question the need for Israel to exist. As one of Ahmadinejad's advisors observed, later in 2007, "by raising the issue of the Holocaust we closed [Iran's] nuclear file."²

The controversy created by this tactic, along with the mistranslation of Ahmadinejad's statement about "wiping Israel off the map" and other inflammatory remarks, did serious damage to Iran's standing with the West. Israeli hardliners and pro-Israel lobbyists in the US used the public position of Ahmadinejad's government to turn the rest of the world against Iran. Ahmadinejad's statements at the same time dashed any hopes of negotiations between the US and Iran. The mere suggestion of discussions would clearly be at great cost to the US and its world standing.

Another consequence of this new policy was that the Iran–Israel conflict became more intense. This approach was intended to deter aggressive policies by the US and Israel, but it merely escalated the conflict between Iran and Israel, as well as the conflict between Iran and the West.

Ahmadinejad's emergence coincided with two major developments that facilitated the creation of an offensive foreign policy. First, Iran's two arch enemies, the Taliban to the east, and Saddam Hussein to the west, both collapsed, in 2001 and 2003 respectively. The overthrow of Saddam raised the prospect of Iran becoming an influential actor

in Iraq's politics, due to its historical relationship with the Iraqi Shia opposition groups. Such a development would severely limit US maneuverability in the post-Saddam period. Second, the sudden increase in the price of oil, reaching record levels after 2005, generated a surge in oil revenues for Iran. This enabled Iran to adopt increasingly aggressive policies that challenged US hegemony in the region.

Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy was basically one of substantial expansion of the nuclear program as a response to Western pressure. The rationale for the actions by Ahmadinejad's administration was rooted in three flawed calculations. First, they did not believe that any sanctions could be imposed. Their calculation was that the IAEA would *not* refer Iran's nuclear file to the UN for the imposition of sanctions—that talk of sanctions “was all a Western bluff and would not happen.” Second, they believed that even if sanctions were imposed, they would not be effective. And third, they were convinced that they only needed to master the complete nuclear fuel cycle, and by that time the matter would be a *fait accompli* and the US would have no choice but to back down from its then pointless threat to intervene. In the end, Iran was proved to be mistaken.

In a remarkably short time, the Ahmadinejad administration's ignorance and inexperience cost Iran almost all of the international goodwill that it had accrued. They had very little capacity for effective diplomatic relations, yet they exuded an abundance of overconfidence, reinforcing their own strategic assumptions amongst each other, but far removed from the realm of practical politics. Ahmadinejad departed from conduct that was traditionally expected of international leaders, instead engaging in belligerent and provocative postures that only served to damage Iran.

Where did Ahmadinejad Stand?

Ahmadinejad rose to power in 2005 almost out of nowhere. His rise was primarily attributed to widespread support from the Principlists (conservatives) loyal to the Supreme Leader, not only within the establishment but also their grassroots conservative supporters. Additionally, his slogans about social and economic justice, as well as his commitment to wage a war against corruption and economic monopoly, attracted large factions of non-conservative, middle-class urbanites. It was only in April 2011, two years into his second term, that

a major rift emerged between him and Principlists. The latent problem flared up when the Minister of Intelligence, Heydar Moslehi, was forced to resign by Ahmadinejad. However, Ayatollah Khamenei intervened and reinstated Moslehi.

To my understanding, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was never a Principlist, hardliner or conservative. His main agenda was to grab power and then stay in power. In pursuit of this goal, he embarked on a multi-dimensional plan. Domestically, he attacked Rafsanjani and Khatami who represented the moderate and reformist currents respectively. By doing so, he sought to eliminate his most threatening rivals, but at the same time buy the support of hardliners and the Supreme Leader who, although not considered a hardliner, *had* sought a tougher foreign policy and *also* did not believe in Rafsanjani and Khatami's conciliatory foreign policy.

With respect to foreign policy, Ahmadinejad pursued a dual approach. He publicly attacked the US and Israel to gain popularity within the conservatives' circle inside Iran and also with the Islamic world outside Iran. He wanted to acquire political clout in the Islamic world so that the Americans could not ignore him. At the same time, he made overt but veiled suggestions regarding rapprochement. Covertly, he intended to take much more significant strides toward rapprochement with the United States. The logic behind this strategy was that if Ahmadinejad could covertly strike a deal with the United States, he would then proclaim the success publicly. In the wake of such a revelation, he would launch a propaganda campaign claiming that the deal was due to his courageous and aggressive stance, and that the US had finally agreed to recognize the Islamic Republic, not only in official terms but more importantly in real terms. Ahmadinejad's announcement of a deal with the US would further discredit moderates and reformists, galvanize the support of conservatives, and, most importantly, make Ahmadinejad a national hero who had been able to bring America to its knees. A legendary Ahmadinejad then would be in a position to craft a Medvedev–Putin-type political model at the end of his second term by bringing one his confidantes to the presidency for four years, and returning as president thereafter. During this period, he might also be able to organize a campaign to amend the constitution, allowing a president to sit for more than two terms.

Ahmadinejad wasted little time, sending messages to the US indicating his willingness to talk even though this ran counter to his public belligerence toward the United States. According to journalist and Iran expert, Barbara Slavin, Condoleezza Rice told her in early

2006, “We were getting pinged in a lot of places, from the United Nations, to Baghdad and the Afghan capital, Kabul, with messages saying the Iranians wanted to talk.”³

When those messages went unanswered, Ahmadinejad wrote a letter to President George W. Bush. A former American politician told me that “the letter was a reflection of an unstable mind.” President Bush’s response was that Iran’s president was “a very strange man.”⁴ And indeed he was. Ahmadinejad made two mistakes, according to an American friend of mine who was a foreign policy official for several years. His first mistake was presenting himself as an “unstable and unpredictable” man. Ahmadinejad lost respect and credibility as a result of his actions. One glaring example of such, to which my friend referred, was Ahmadinejad’s UN speeches, where he condemned “rapacious capitalism” and predicted the collapse of the “American empire.”⁵ According to my friend, Ahmadinejad’s second mistake was his belief that by denying the Holocaust, he would put the US and the West on the defensive. But, on the contrary, this tactic simply provoked a more aggressive Western policy toward Iran. Apart from anything else, it became politically difficult, if not impossible, for a US president to talk to a leader who denied that the Holocaust ever took place.

Ahmadinejad’s unprecedented, congratulatory letter to President Obama also went unanswered. Instead, Obama wrote a letter to the Supreme Leader, completely ignoring Ahmadinejad. In his interview with Larry King in September 2010, Ahmadinejad said that he was ready to meet with Obama during the UN General Assembly.⁶ But a couple of days later, in his UN speech, he proclaimed that the US was behind the 9/11 attacks.⁷

In 2012, an American member of the Iran–US Track II⁸ (simply called Track II) told me that Mashaei, Ahmadinejad’s senior aide and mentor, had met with former US officials to discuss the possibility of opening direct talks. Earlier, in January 2011, another American member of Track II told me that Iran, through its ambassador to the UN, has asked the State Department to introduce a representative for “serious and comprehensive” talks. “The State Department’s response was disappointing,” my Track II friend said. “They are ready to meet with the Iranians but they will only listen, not talk.” He also told me that in an effort to arrange a meeting between the Iranian and American officials, he had been in contact with an Iranian ambassador in Europe. The ambassador had told him that everything was set from Iran’s side—Esfandiar Mashaie and Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh were going to

attend the meeting. “[The] meeting will be held in Berlin,” the Iranian ambassador told my American friend. He responded:

But the White House said “no.” They said that they did not want to engage with the Iranians outside of the P5+1 framework. The White House maintained that if they [other members of P5+1] realize that we have been engaged in secret talks behind their back, it would cause a deep sense of mistrust of the US government.

Two Track II members (one a former US official) contacted me a month and a half later and said that they had met Mostafa Dowlatyar, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, in Stockholm. Dowlatyar, they said, proposed to extend an invitation to Marc Grossman, US special envoy to Afghanistan, to officially travel to Tehran and meet with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. The two Track II team members said that on their return to Washington, they met with and conveyed the message to Hillary Clinton. They were later told that Grossman would not go to Iran, but the ambassadors of Iran and the US could meet in Kabul, Afghanistan.

In March 2011, I participated in a conference in the United States at which an American official told me that the US regularly received messages from Mashaei claiming that Tehran was eager to talk and establish relations with the US. He said that, “Ahmadinejad’s administration constantly sends the US messages. The channels that convey these messages are so numerous that we don’t know which one to choose. We are just confused. We did not answer for we were not sure if those messages had Ayatollah Khamenei’s backing.”

While Ahmadinejad attacked Obama publicly, claiming that “he cannot write his name” (an Iranian saying which means that a person is incompetent), he relentlessly pursued the Americans seeking talks with himself or his representatives. Another Track II friend told me, “I have met Mashaei eight times. In all meetings Tehran is seeking an opening to talks and relations with the US.”

On September 25, 2011, during his visit to New York, Ahmadinejad stated that, “The Islamic Republic is ready to reconsider its negative view toward the US.” Implying that Iran and the US should talk bilaterally rather than within the framework of P5+1 (which at the time was completely out of his control and was supervised by the Supreme Leader directly), Ahmadinejad added, “This issue is between Iran and the US ... I believe we must resolve it through different means other than the nuclear negotiations.”⁹

Along with Professor Frank von Hippel I was teaching a class at Princeton University on the Iranian nuclear crisis in the fall of 2011. The university had arranged for students to meet with German and French authorities who had been involved in the nuclear talks with Iran, and during that visit, I was told by a German official whom I knew that “Mashaei had a secret meeting with Christoph Heusgen, the National Advisor on Foreign and Security Policy to Chancellor Angela Merkel. The meeting took place in the residence of a former deputy foreign minister of Germany. Mashaei had asked the Germans to inform Washington that Tehran was ready to re-establish relations. Mashaei said that Iran even was ready to contribute to Obama’s campaign in the next elections.” According to my friend, the Americans’ response to the Germans was, “Don’t get involved in the issue.”

A few months away from the end of his second term, during his last appearance in New York, Ahmadinejad announced, “Iran recognizes the United States and believes that we can have relations with each other.”¹⁰ He added, “The Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared to expedite [the re-establishment of the] relations between the two countries.” He was clearly not worried about the prospect of domestic attacks by the hardliners at that juncture. A senior foreign affairs advisor to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati, responded swiftly to Ahmadinejad’s statements saying, “Iran’s general policy with respect to relations with the US has not changed and no decision has been made in this regard.”¹¹

Beleaguered and struggling for his political life, Ahmadinejad did not drop his agenda. He knew that his advocacy of better relations with the US would not go anywhere, but was simply a last attempt by him to remain relevant. During his final New York visit, he repeated the proposal on no fewer than five different occasions, intending to demonstrate his sincerity by restating the message. After all his negative rhetoric, Ahmadinejad now wanted to convince the world and his own people that he was the man who sought to bring the Iran–US conflict to an end, removing sanctions against Iran, but that he was prevented by his opponents from doing so. Ahmadinejad hoped until the very end of his presidency that he could still establish strong, grassroots support in order to effect his eventual return after the end of his second term of office.

George W. Bush vs. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

President Bush's second term coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in Iran. In 2006, Iran's nuclear dossier was referred to the UNSC by the IAEA for punitive action. This was primarily the consequence of failed talks with the EU3 and failure to fulfill the IAEA demands. The Board of Governors' resolution cited the "absence of confidence that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes resulting from the history of concealment."¹² Iran was therefore implored to "re-establish full and sustained suspension of all" enrichment activities.

The White House's second National Security Strategy under George W. Bush was unveiled on March 16, 2006. "We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran," the report read.¹³ That same day, Ali Larijani, Iran's new secretary of the SNSC, announced that Iran was willing to talk to the United States, but it was clear that the Americans had decided to get tough on Iran and that they would even consider launching a pre-emptive military strike against it. As Tehran sent messages through numerous channels requesting direct talks, it was shocked by Condoleezza Rice's request for an additional \$75 million to promote democracy in Iran.¹⁴ "Now regime change is the official policy of the United States," I was told by an Iranian official.

Shortly thereafter, the State Department announced a new Iran Desk in Dubai, and added staff and training for more Farsi-speaking officers, all assigned to watch Tehran.¹⁵ To the Iranian government, it was apparent that the purpose of the station was to organize an espionage network for possible sabotage inside Iran, ultimately intended to bring the system down. Undersecretary Nicholas Burns compared the new Dubai outpost to the Riga station in Latvia where the American diplomat, George Kennan, had laid the foundations of the Cold War against the Soviet Union in the 1930s with the strategic aim of bringing down the communist system.¹⁶ While rumors about a broad air campaign were all over the news every day, I was told by an Iranian official that Iran's intelligence had discovered evidence that the Americans were in contact with minority groups to use them to create chaos by organizing terrorist attacks. A horrific story revealed in the *Telegraph* added to the anxiety in Tehran. It claimed that Britain was holding secret talks at the highest levels of government "to discuss possible military strikes against Iran."¹⁷ It was against this backdrop that, for the first time in 27 years, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, initiated communication with his American counterpart.

In his 18-page letter to George W. Bush, Ahmadinejad covered many subjects. These included regional and international concerns such as the misguided war that the US waged in Iraq and Afghanistan, destabilizing the region; Palestinian rights; strong US support for Israel; research and development in science; and even the reasons for the September 11, 2001 attacks. He listed Iran's grievances with the US, namely the 1953 coup; US support for Saddam; the downing of the Iranian passenger plane; the freezing of Iranian assets; and the attempts to block Iran's scientific and nuclear ambitions. He brought in numerous references to religion and an affinity with God. The letter also included a number of invitations and ultimatums that anyone familiar with Western political culture would have recognized as irrelevant, if not insulting.

Many of my American friends, scholars, and politicians considered the letter inquisitive, insulting, and naïve. But regardless of its content, the fact that for the first time an Iranian president wrote an official letter to the US president was highly significant. I believe that the letter was intended to open the doors to bilateral dialogue. As I mentioned earlier, for personal reasons, Ahmadinejad was determined to resolve the conflict between Iran and the US. During his first term in particular, he had the wholehearted trust of the *nezam*, and likely *could have* struck a deal with the US. In any event, George Bush did not respond to the letter.

A few months later, in July 2006, in response to the abduction of two Israeli soldiers and the killing of eight others by Hezbollah militants, war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah. Kidnapping the Israeli soldiers was in retaliation for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reneging on his agreement with Hezbollah to release all Hezbollah prisoners during the last prisoners' exchange.

Israel initiated heavy air and ground operations, bombarding Lebanon's major highways and ports, but the ultimate objective of the operation was to decapitate the Hezbollah military and political organization. At the end of the first week, Israel expanded its air attacks against civilian centers, including schools, community centers, and mosques. They believed that Hezbollah hid its military assets inside those civilian centers. The result of this assessment and action was the tragedy of Qana.¹⁸ The US and other Western powers stood by as spectators, hoping that Israel would root out the Hezbollah military, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice describing the bloody confrontation as "The birth pangs of a new Middle East."¹⁹

Through the fourth week, it became apparent that Israel and the Western governments had miscalculated with regard to Hezbollah's strength, as the organization withstood the invasion, and Israel was forced to retreat. The Israeli army's failure to accomplish its goal—the destruction of Hezbollah's military and command capabilities—marked the first significant defeat of Israel in a full-blown war against any Arab force. The conflict was referred to as the 33-day war in Iran, and it established a mindset within the Iranian military-intelligence establishment that despite its highly-advanced army, Israel was not unbeatable. But another significant outcome of the conflict was that Iran now emerged as a force that could successfully wage a proxy war against Israel, something that tilt the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Iran.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) or roadside bombs were explicitly targeting US troops. The US government accused Iran of supplying IEDs to the insurgents but Iran denied the allegation. Some reports claimed that IEDs were responsible for three out of five conflict-related deaths in Iraq.²⁰ Since 2003, when the US swiftly toppled Saddam Hussein, Iran has strengthened its influence in Iraq with every passing year, capitalizing on historical, cultural, and religious roots that acted as a bond between the two countries, with the ultimate aim of establishing strategic relations with Baghdad. Tehran's influence in Iraq was such that it appeared to be indispensable for the stabilization of the country. As a prominent Iranian expert, Dr. Vali Nasr, put it, the US wanted “an endgame in Iraq,” but there was “no endgame without involving Iran.”²¹

By late 2006, the picture was very different and Washington's early victories seemed a long time ago, as the US was now bogged down in Iraq and faced increased sectarian violence and mounting US casualties. To assess the situation in Iraq and identify mechanisms to protect the US interests, Congress formed the bi-partisan Baker–Hamilton Iraq Study Group. The group's panelists met, interviewed, or consulted hundreds of high-ranking current and former officials, senior military officers, non-governmental organization leaders, and academics.²² James Baker, a leading member of the group, had a long meeting with Iran's UN ambassador, Javad Zarif, at his New York residence.

The group's report produced a great stir in policy circles in the US as it prescribed bold moves to address the worsening conditions in Iraq. With regard to Iran–US relations, the report recommended that, “Given the ability of Iran and Syria to influence events within Iraq and

their interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq, the United States should try to engage them constructively.”²³ Bush did not agree with the much-anticipated outcome of this initiative. His view was that “Iran is promoting an extreme form of religion ... Iran’s a destabilizing force.”²⁴ Even Admiral Fallon, head of the US Central Command, recommended US engagement with Iran, but he was overruled by Bush. “Admiral Fallon attended a White House meeting on Iran. ‘I think we need to do something to get engaged with these guys,’ Fallon said.”²⁵ Using a very derogatory term for the Iranians, Bush rejected Fallon’s suggestion. “Fallon was stunned. Declaring them ‘...’ was not a strategy.”²⁶

The deteriorating situation in Iraq left the Bush administration with no choice but to give the green light to the US ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, to hold talks with his counterpart, Ambassador Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, in trilateral meetings hosted by the Iraqi government that would focus on Iraq’s stability.²⁷ The Baghdad talks held on May 28, 2007 marked the first official meeting between the US and Iran since the Algiers Accords of January 1981.²⁸ Following the first round of talks, there was cautious optimism, with the US ambassador stating:

The Iranians, as well as ourselves, laid out the principles that guide our respective policies toward Iraq. There was pretty good congruence right down the line: support for a secure, stable, democratic, federal Iraq, in control of its own security, at peace with its neighbors.²⁹

Meanwhile, his Iranian counterpart provided concrete steps for cooperation: “Iran is willing to train and equip Iraqi security forces to create a new military and security structure.”³⁰ There were three rounds of talks in total, taking place in May, June, and August of that year during which both countries discussed ways to mitigate the violence in Iraq and pave the way for its stability.³¹ While the talks were restricted to topics pertaining to Iraq’s stability, the mere fact that both sides were at the same table was an important step towards dialogue and understanding. But the talks stuttered, with Americans claiming that Iran was playing an increasingly destabilizing role in Iraq by supplying weaponry, training, and finance to insurgents that had conducted attacks on US and coalition forces—a charge denied by Iran.³² Ambassador Crocker acknowledged that during the talks, he “laid out before the Iranians a number of direct, specific concerns about their behavior in Iraq—their support for militias that are fighting both the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces.” He went on to add, “The fact [is] that a lot of explosives and ammunitions used by these

groups are coming from Iran ... The Iranians did not respond directly to that, they did again emphasize that their policy is support of the [Iraqi] government.”³³ The Iranians also voiced their grievances with America, demanding an explanation for groups that were committing “infiltration and sabotage in western, central and south-western areas of the country” at the behest of the US and UK to heighten ethnic tensions in western Iran as a means of pressing Tehran on other issues such as the contentious nuclear program.³⁴

The list of accusations and grievances on both sides did hamper the talks. The fact that the Iranian leadership permitted talks between Iran and US to take place at all was an indication of the willingness on the part of Iran to build upon areas of mutual interest. However, leading figures in the Iranian government were skeptical about striking a deal with Washington and expected that the US would not respond in kind. America could have welcomed the Iranian delegation’s offer to establish a “trilateral mechanism” to coordinate security matters in Iraq and make a concerted effort to stabilize that country, rooting out the al-Qaeda network and operatives.³⁵ But the Bush administration’s natural inclination was to turn their backs on cooperation with the Iranians, and to avoid any kind of recognition.

Tehran identified two clear motives for the Bush administration’s behavior. First, neo-conservatives dictated a commitment to military and forceful solutions, including “detering or, when needed ... compelling regional foes to act in ways that protect American interests and principle.”³⁶ Foes were foes and to make friends with them was off the table. Second, the Israel lobby now had unprecedented influence with the American government, commanding a hardline with Iran.

The book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, the first of its kind in the academic sphere, authored by Stephen Walt (Harvard University) and John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago), was an indication of the lobby’s increased influence in US foreign policy. Mearsheimer and Walt argued that Iran’s nuclear ambition did not pose a threat to the US, but *did* pose a threat to the security of Israel. They posited that “the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the [Middle East] region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics and especially to the activities of the Israel lobby.”³⁷ After examining the issue of the Israeli lobby, they concluded that neither strategic interests nor moral imperatives explained the “unconditional support” for Israel. They therefore argued that the policies of the US in the Middle East were influenced by the “unmatched power of the Israel lobby” actively working “to shape US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.”³⁸ Scholar and former American

politician David Miller remarked, "Today you cannot be successful in American politics and not be good on Israel. And AIPAC plays a key role in making that happen."³⁹ According to Jeffrey Goldberg, the American journalist, AIPAC is a "leviathan among lobbies."⁴⁰ There can be little doubt that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, such as his denial of the Holocaust, was a major factor in increasing the influence of Israel and its lobby on US policy toward Iran.

In December 2007 the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was published. It stunned the US administration, Israel, and Western countries. The report maintained "with high confidence" that Iran had suspended its military nuclear program in 2003 and that there was no conclusive evidence of its revival. The report dealt a serious blow to the consistent US assertion that Iran was in the process of building an atomic bomb. The most shocking revelation connected with this matter came much later, however, when President Bush revealed in his memoirs that the unexpected NIE assessment had "tied my hands on the military side."⁴¹ This statement may explain why the Bush administration did not want to engage in serious talks and cooperation with Iran.

Confusion in the Bush administration became ever more apparent in July 2008. Despite their firm position against talks unless enrichment ended by July 2008, William Burns, the successor of Nicholas Burns, joined the European Union Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana, and Saïid Jalili, Iran's nuclear negotiator, in a meeting in Geneva. However, a few days later, President Bush once again spoke of his regime change in front of an audience.

Even now, change is stirring in places like Havana and Damascus and Tehran. The people of these nations dream of a free future, hope for a free future, and believe that a free future will come. And it will. May God be with them in their struggle. America always will be.⁴²

All told, the outcome of this confrontation from 2005 to 2009 between Iran and the US was that Iran was convinced that the US's aim was regime change. Iranian mistrust of the US intensified even further, leading to the conclusion that the only way to deal with hostile US policies was to resist and damage US interests in the Middle East. Iran determined to do this by, on the one hand, spreading anti-Americanism, and on the other, by strengthening its military, primarily missile capability.

The Espionage Dossier

After ending my relationship with Ahmadinejad's team in 2005, I began a new career at the Center for Strategic Research which was affiliated to the Expediency Discernment Council of the *Nezam* (also known as the Expediency Council), headed by Rafsanjani. The Center works on policy issues as an advisory think tank for the Expediency Council. Hassan Rouhani had already been appointed as the head of the Center, and I worked as his deputy of international affairs.

My stand-off with Ahmadinejad's confrontational policies on nuclear and foreign issues started here, as I regularly prepared policy papers criticizing those policies, sending them to hundreds of high-ranking officials, including ministers, members of the parliament, provincial governors, and others. In those papers I predicted the consequences of Ahmadinejad's policies, including escalation of the sanctions. Interestingly, every time I warned the *nezam* of a new set of sanctions, Ahmadinejad and his administration were defiant. The sanctions, however, happened the way I predicted. In one case, after the sanction resolution 1373 was passed by the UNSC, I held a press conference at Mehr News Agency and explained to the public how detrimental the sanctions could be, both economically and politically. Ahmadinejad could not tolerate this stance, especially as I belonged to his rival camp. Finally, on April 30, 2007, I was arrested and charged with actions against Iran's national security interest and revealing secret documents to Western officials.

Ahmadinejad accused me in his public speeches of espionage for the West, while neither the judge, nor the interrogators made that accusation. Ahmadinejad called me a "lackey for the West" and a traitor. From April 30 to May 10 I was in a solitary cell under interrogation.

The day after that I was released, I met with Rafsanjani in his home. He told me that some reliable sources had informed him that a series of arrests targeting the moderate and reformist camps had been planned after my arrest. He said that Ahmadinejad's camp wanted me to confess to the charges that had been leveled against me, and then, based on that confession, they would launch a huge propaganda campaign to destroy Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Hassan Rouhani, portraying the former nuclear negotiating team as traitors, and follow this up with a new series of arrests. Also, by seeking lengthy jail sentences, they planned to eliminate moderates from the Iranian political arena. In addition, because I regularly attended international conferences and was considered a *de facto* spokesman of the moderates, they intended to send a message to the West showing

how weak and irrelevant we were as a group inside Iran. According to Rafsanjani, to eliminate both Moderates and even their rivals in the Principalists' camp, they planned to collect documents to use against prominent figures who were considered as rivals to eliminate both Moderate and Principalists rivalries, in the next parliamentary elections. He confided, "I am convinced their main target is the Supreme Leader but they need to eliminate me first."

Ahmadinejad's affiliated media published 13 accusations and charges against me, such as spying, communicating with foreign embassies, revealing secret documents, encouraging the world powers to pass sanction resolutions against Iran, meeting with American diplomats, and others. I was stunned because not even one of those charges existed in my case file, nor were they raised during my interrogations. The judge and the interrogators never raised any of the 13 charges published in media. I later discovered that the list of accusations was prepared prior to my arrest and that they anticipated that I would confess to those charges under pressure during the interrogations.

I met with the judge and the representative of the security establishment supervising my case. I asked them why they let the pro-Ahmadinejad media make accusations against me that were a complete fabrication. They simply said, "We cannot do anything about it." Ahmadinejad took every opportunity to attack me and label me a spy. After my arrest, a number of top politicians, from the Principlists to moderates and reformists, met with the Supreme Leader and complained about the propaganda that accused me of espionage. These included the former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami; Nategh Nouri, former chairman of the parliament and the head of the Inspection Office of the Supreme Leader; Mehdi Karroubi, another former chairman of the parliament; Emami Kashani, Tehran Interim Friday Prayers Leader; and even Hashemi Shahroudi, head of the judiciary. I was informed by this group that based on a report delivered by the head of judiciary, the Supreme Leader did not believe the charges on espionage against me, and regretted the action taken against me, but did not want to interfere in judicial matters. Rouhani told me that Ayatollah Khamenei had once privately criticized Ahmadinejad for his public accusations on espionage, but that confrontation had not altered Ahmadinejad's approach.

My case was investigated by three judges in the span of one year. All of the judges found me "not guilty" on espionage charges, but one of them maintained that while I was in jail and during my defense that followed, I had confessed my opposition to Ahmadinejad's nuclear

and foreign policy. Therefore, I was guilty of challenging Ahmadinejad as the president and the head of SNSC, thus jeopardizing national security. Finally on March 20, 2008, prior to court meeting, I was informed by Mortazavi, the General Prosecutor of Tehran, that I would receive a two-year suspended jail sentence and a five-year ban on holding any diplomatic position. I told him, “I would not accept any diplomatic post, nor would Ahmadinejad offer me one. However, this mean that Ahmadinejad plans to have another term and my ban would run concurrent to his term—for that period, I would be out of a diplomatic job.” He smiled at me and said, “You are very clever.”

On September 15, 2008, Ahmad Tavakoli, a prominent parliamentary figure from the Principlists’ camp and the head of the *Majlis*’ research center that manages one of the influential political websites called Alef, publicly stated that all the accusations against me were “completely fabricated.” In a letter that appeared on his website, Tavakoli explained:

Almost all the news in this regard was either direct quotes from state officials such as the president, the administration spokesperson, minister of intelligence or the spokesperson for the foreign relations committee, the national security committee of the *Majlis*, or other sources. Defense attorneys for the suspect asserted that most of the charges against their client that appeared in the media were false and neither the ministry of intelligence nor the attorney general had reported them in their documents. After four months of investigation including meetings with relevant authorities and reading many documents, I came to the conclusion that Mousavian is right and all accusations are baseless.⁴³

Tavakoli listed all 13 accusations and apologized for them, asking my family and me to forgive him.⁴⁴

I responded to him in a letter, in which I wrote, “Until now, I have remained silent in the interests of the country, and I want to continue this. I am confident that after studying relevant documents and speaking with appropriate officials, you now understand the secret of my silence.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad remained defiant, responding to a question about my arrest, on the occasion of a speech on March 20, 2009, with the claim, “If this had happened anywhere else it would have been punished with death.”⁴⁶

In addition to Ahmad Tavakkoli, some other important media outlets, such as the *Siasat-e Rooz* daily and several close to the Principlists' camp, apologized to me a few months after publishing the accusations. Principlist lawmaker Emad Afroogh wrote to me, noting that I was a "victim of misunderstandings, connections and the usual political and factional bickering which of course are contrary to moral and spiritual values espoused by society and the Islamic Revolution." However, after the final verdict in April 2008 referred to above, Ahmadinejad once again called for the death penalty and criticized the way the judiciary had handled the case.⁴⁷

I now took the advice of many politicians from both the moderate and Principalist camps to stay in Iran until the next election, planned for June 2009.

The Biggest Domestic Crisis since the Revolution

The June 2009 election turned out to be the biggest internal crisis since the Islamic Republic's inception. Soon after the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory on public TV and radio stations, protestors poured onto the streets of Tehran. They claimed that the election had been rigged and that the actual winner was Mir Hossein Mousavi, the reformist (former leftist) candidate. Massive demonstrations were held in Tehran and other large cities. The uprising turned bloody. Security forces deployed an excessive use of force to counter the protestors. As the waves of arrests and bloody confrontations continued unabated, I hastened to meet top politicians such as Rafsanjani, Velayati, Rouhani, and Nateq Nouri. I sought their advice on whether I should stay or leave the country. With the exception of Rouhani, they all agreed that in the circumstances I would be best advised to pursue postdoctoral research and studies abroad.

My absence did not stop Ahmadinejad from attacking me. In a private meeting in the holy city of Mashhad, he said, "If Mousavian's file would have been managed properly he would have received execution."

In June 2013, the landslide victory of Rouhani put an end to the eight-year rule of Ahmadinejad. Not surprisingly, his farewell was preceded by months of humiliating public attacks from all political spectrums, from Principlists to moderates and reformists.⁴⁸ Before the presidential election of 2013, some of Ahmedinejad's close allies were accused variously of financial corruption,⁴⁹ sorcery,⁵⁰ or espionage.⁵¹ Following the victory of the moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani, Ahmadinejad

was summoned to a criminal court in Tehran to answer unspecified charges.⁵²

Misanalysis abounds in Tehran and Washington

During his presidential election campaign, Obama had advocated US engagement with Iran without preconditions. So, logically, his election victory was a major boon to all those in Iran hoping for a genuine opportunity to improve relations with the US. However, by that time, the moderates had already been pushed to the margins and the Principlists were in full control. They were delusional about defeating the arrogant powers, namely the West, aiming to replace the moderates' approach, which was based on negotiation and diplomacy, with the idea that "the best defense is offense."

Probably the Iranian most pleased about the election result was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He viewed Obama's election as an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy in the history of the Islamic Republic. On November 6, 2008 he became the first Iranian president since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to send a complimentary letter to his US counterpart, with the following opening line, "I would like to offer my congratulations on your election by the majority of the American electorate."⁵³

The letter was written in a reconciliatory tone that encouraged "fundamental change in the American government's policies," stating that, "Iran would welcome major, fair and real changes, in policies and actions, especially in [the Middle East] region."⁵⁴ He continued that there was a genuine hope that Obama would reverse "[US] unjust actions of the past 60 years ... to a policy encouraging full rights for all nations, especially the oppressed nations of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan ... and that the enormous damage done in the past will be somewhat diminished." While the White House confirmed receipt of the letter, they took no immediate action, nor did Obama respond at all.

Ahmadinejad was oblivious to the fact that his past actions and pronouncements—such as his lecturing to the leaders of developed countries, his publicly stated belief in the inevitability of the West's collapse and the ascendance of Iran, and his self-promotion as someone suitable to engage in "global management"⁵⁵—had earned him a reputation as an unstable figure, not to be taken seriously. Additionally, he had miscalculated the effects of denying the Holocaust which, contrary to

his expectations, put the US in an offensive position and significantly increased the costs of any future Iranian negotiations with the US.

Then came Nowruz, the Iranian New Year. On March 20, 2009, Obama sent a congratulatory televised message to the Iranians.⁵⁶ In that unprecedented broadcast, he addressed the “Iranian leaders” and “the Islamic Republic” as opposed to the “Iranian regime,” which had been the descriptive term traditionally used by his predecessors in office. Obama offered a “new beginning,” but also cautioned the Iranian government against supporting “terror” and attempting to build “arms.” To those not familiar with the importance of pride in Iranian politics, these references might not appear significant, but to Iranians they touched a raw nerve.

Ayatollah Khamenei immediately attacked Obama, talking of “a velvet glove” concealing a “cast iron hand.” He went on: “[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.”⁵⁷

Still, Ahmadinejad made a second attempt. Mohamed ElBaradei revealed in his memoir that Ahmadinejad sent a message through him in 2009 offering Obama Iran’s readiness “to engage in bilateral negotiations, without conditions, on the basis of mutual respect.”⁵⁸ He also held out the prospect of “helping the US in Afghanistan and elsewhere.” This overture met with the same fate as the first one.

President Obama, blatantly ignoring Ahmadinejad, wrote⁵⁹ a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei. I heard from reliable sources that Obama informed the Iranian Supreme Leader of his willingness to engage in bilateral talks aimed at improving relations between their two countries, fostering regional cooperation, and in search of a resolution of the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. The message was passed to the Foreign Ministry of Iran by the Swiss Embassy.

One former US diplomat told me that the “White House was surprised that Ayatollah Khamenei responded in a respectful tone. However, the Supreme Leader described the grievances of Iran and criticized American policies, not only toward Iran but toward the entire Islamic world, but he positively responded to Obama’s offer for détente based on mutual respect and mutual interest.”

A lack of mutual understanding has always been one of the major obstacles to sustainable and meaningful talks between Iran and the US. Iran’s leader has even stated that he was “not a diplomat but a revolutionary,”⁶⁰ hoping to convey to Washington that he was a straightforward person who did not use diplomatic language. Only

a few of Iran's senior officials have lived in the West, and only a few have studied politics or related subjects. Diplomacy with the US, therefore, is certainly not one of Iran's strongest suits. There is a similar shortage of knowledge about Iran's society, culture, and politics among American analysts and policy-makers. Only a very few analysts and policy-makers are fluent in Farsi, and barely any Iranian-American analyst has resided in Iran for any extended time period. To make matters worse, most of them do not relate and have not related to ordinary Iranians, and even fewer work with or have ever worked with Iran's influential clergy, ruling elite, or high-ranking officials, something that would have provided them with an insight on Iran's perception of negotiations and what motivates them. Moreover, some of the former Iranian officials and experts who left Iran because of differences over the system, now align themselves with a Western/US view of Iran's politics in order to ingratiate themselves with Western/US opinion.

In any case, the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei replied to President Obama's letter was enough for Obama to send a second one.⁶¹ This second letter was one of the most significant exchanges between the two capitals at the highest level of government since the Islamic Revolution. As one informed former US diplomat reliably disclosed to me, President Obama took this opportunity to introduce two representatives—William Burns from the State Department, and Puneet Talwar from the White House—to talk with Iranian representatives of Ayatollah Khamenei's choice. The letter arrived only days prior to Iran's June 2009 presidential elections. An informed Iranian diplomat told me that "Ayatollah Khamenei was ready to respond positively again." He continued: "Tehran was even working on the draft of the letter. But in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, protests took the streets of Tehran by storm and the US sided with the demonstrators, making the Leader doubtful about the real intentions of the US. That was why the Leader did not respond to the second letter."

Three hours after the polls closed, Mir Hossein Mousavi, former leftist but then transformed to a reformist, rushed to claim victory by saying in a press conference, "I am the definite winner of this presidential election."⁶² Mousavi's claim was based on the results he had received from the yet-unfinished counts from the Tehran polling stations. He called on his supporters to celebrate the following day.

Reviewing the slogans, speeches, and articles of the protestors following the June election, it was apparent that despite the economic hardships that many Iranians were experiencing, economic demands

did not feature in their list of expectations. The protestors, included many intellectuals, writers, artists, and academics, but it was the young, middle, and upper-middle class who formed the majority of the movement. The fact that the backbone of the so-called Green Movement was shaped by the middle and upper-middle class explains why the movement was focused on civil rights and posed no economic demands during and after the protests. In other words, the Green Movement mainly reflected the *will* and demands of a particular, albeit not insignificant, liberal faction of society. To see the Green Movement as the will of *the* people of Iran is a misperception. It was no surprise that in Tehran and Shemiranat, the northern part of Tehran, where upper- and middle-class residents live, Mousavi beat Ahmadinejad. It also may explain why the protests varied in size and lingered in Tehran in comparison to other large cities. Ahmadinejad's approach toward those that did not want to see him as president for another term was offensive, insulting, and extremely disrespectful. This had produced disdain for him among a large faction of young urbanites.

During Friday prayers after the election, Ayatollah Khamenei gave his support to Ahmadinejad against Rafsanjani. He revealed that there were (and there still are) differences between Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, but emphasized, "Of course Mr. President's [Ahmadinejad] views are closer to mine."⁶³ During the same speech, he dismissed the idea of election fraud. Two days after this speech, the Guardians Council pronounced that "The vote tally affected by such issues as votes cast surpassing the number of eligible voters could be just over 3 million, and would not noticeably affect the outcome of the election."⁶⁴ In its detailed report, the Council gave unequivocal approval of the result of the election: "[T]he Guardian Council discussed all issues in various meetings and decided that complaints and objections raised about the tenth presidential election were not valid."⁶⁵

Addressing the street protests, Ayatollah Khamenei said, "I want everyone to end this sort of action. If they do not stop, then the consequences of this rest with them ... Please note, it is a wrong impression that some people have, thinking that through illegal street gatherings, they can create a lever of pressure against the *nezam*." Mousavi was placed in a difficult position, and seriously questioned the impartiality of the Guardian Council. Meanwhile Ahmadinejad had his own agenda which did not exactly coincide with that of Iran's Supreme Leader. Many leading Principlist politicians also underestimated the strength of ill feeling toward Ahmadinejad amongst a large faction of Iranian society. Furthermore, the protests had done significant damage to the

credibility of the *nezam*—a development that the United States could exploit. There was a heavy price to be paid for supporting Ahmadinejad, who ultimately turned against the Principlists in his second term.

These upheavals caused a sudden shift in the West's approach toward Tehran, especially that of the US. Obama, who by now had written his second conciliatory letter to Iran's Supreme Leader only a few days before the elections, condemned the heavy-handed crackdown on protestors and said:

I strongly condemn these unjust actions ... I've made it clear that the United States respects the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is not interfering with Iran's affairs. But we must also bear witness to the courage and the dignity of the Iranian people, and to a remarkable opening within Iranian society. And we deplore the violence against innocent civilians anywhere that it takes place ... Those who stand up for justice are always on the right side of history.⁶⁶

At the Friday prayers that followed the elections, referred to above, Ayatollah Khamenei revealed the existence of Obama's letter in an angry tone and said, "On the one hand, they write a letter to us to express their respect for the Islamic Republic and for re-establishment of ties, and on the other hand they make these remarks."⁶⁷

The clashes between the Iranian security forces and protestors were widely reported in the West. America's support for the protests convinced an already-suspicious Iranian leadership that the Green Movement was guided from Washington, which sought to organize a "color revolution" on the model developed in a number of states of the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement seemed to confirm this assessment: "Now, behind the scenes, we were doing a lot. We were doing a lot to really empower the protestors without getting in the way. And we're continuing to speak out and support the opposition."⁶⁸

US support for Iran's newly born civil rights movement, the Green Movement, was seen by the Iranian leadership as clear evidence of US interference in the internal affairs of Iran. Many observers posited that the US had to support and empower the Green Movement,^{69 70 71} based on the logic that, "The only thing standing between the mullahs and the bomb is the Green Movement."⁷² The US government gave unprecedented air time on Voice of America to representatives of the Iranian opposition who sought to overthrow the Iranian government.

The participants in the program suggested ways for people inside Iran to engage in anti-government protests and other forms of civil disobedience. Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State, told the US Senate:

We have increased the scope of our efforts aimed at challenging the Iranian government's deplorable human rights violations. [Among other plans] we also continue to work quietly with civil society organizations in Iran to give them the tools they need to expand political space and hold their government accountable.⁷³

Believing that one further push might be enough to bring down the *nezam*, a foreign policy expert asserted that, "if the United States ... supports the aspirations of the Iranian people, it could inspire young non-ideological Iranians ... to confront [the] security forces in the hope of overthrowing the regime."⁷⁴ Richard Haass, a noted American foreign policy expert and the president of the Council on Foreign Relations think tank, wrote in an article titled "Regime Change Is the Only Way to Stop Iran" that "I've changed my mind. The nuclear talks are going nowhere... Outsiders should act to strengthen the opposition and to deepen rifts among the rulers. This process is underway, and while it will take time, it promises the first good chance in decades to bring about an Iran than, even if less than a model country, would nonetheless act considerably better at home and abroad. Even a realist should recognize that it's an opportunity not to be missed."⁷⁵

The website of Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign claimed that the actual distribution of votes in the 2009 election was 21.3 million for Mousavi and only 10.5 million for Ahmadinejad.⁷⁶ This is of course not an objective source, but taking these figures at face value, the conservatives, at the time represented by Ahmadinejad, had a minimum of over 10 million supporters. Many conservatives might well have voted for Mousavi since only candidates devoted to the Islamic system and *velayat-e faqih* were approved to stand in the election by the Guardian Council, which is tasked with the vetting of candidates.

The debate about who won the 2009 election is beyond the scope of this book.⁷⁷ However, we should safely conclude even though there were large numbers of protestors in the streets, a large section of the population also supported the sitting president and his team. So, the protests in 2009 were not simply a case of *the people* against the *nezam*. This was, in fact, a revival of a hundred-year-old struggle—what the Iranian sociologist Ramin Jahanbegloo refers to as a continuous tension—between tradition and modernity.⁷⁸

By misreading the situation in Iran, America therefore adopted policies that did not help them achieve their objective of regime change or the promotion of democracy. But it *did* justify the hardliners' negative reaction to the US approach. I highlighted such American misunderstanding in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*: "Regime change is not part of Iran's outlook in the near future, Iran is not in a pre-revolutionary state. What is happening on the streets of Iran is an internal challenge wherein the final result will greatly impact Iran's domestic and foreign policies." But in that interview,⁷⁹ I continued to press the US to engage with Tehran in a bid to reduce regional tensions. I wanted the US to shape a comprehensive dialogue with Iran based on shared interests in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan. I proposed that America should develop a broad security plan with Tehran for the Persian Gulf that could secure the free flow of energy in and out of the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Constructive cooperation between Tehran and Washington would be crucial for a regional security structure. Thirty years of hostilities between Tehran and Washington had only served to diminish security in the region and, to that end, I downplayed the prospects of any quick leadership change in Tehran, insisting that a move toward democracy could only be stimulated from inside Iran. Instead, I implored Washington to fashion a patient foreign policy toward Iran, understanding that progress in improving Iran–US relations would take years, not months.⁸⁰

"Iranian Diplomat in U.S. Opens Window on Tehran"⁸¹ was the title of that *Wall Street Journal* article of June 29, 2010. At the time, many in the US thought that the Green Movement would bring regime change in Tehran. My interview was aimed at dispelling such misperceptions. However, the pro-Ahmadinejad media in Iran used the title of the *Wall Street Journal* article to launch a new round of attacks on me. For example, *Kayhan*, the hardline newspaper, mistranslated the title, commenting that "Mousavian has opened a window of information for Americans." This led to further baseless accusations of espionage against me. On the contrary, my remarks were intended to correct the Americans' misperception about regime change in Iran. Here again, domestic rivalry in Iran contributed to more misanalysis and a further escalation of hostility between Iran and the United States.

Chapter 7

TWO VIEWS ON MAJOR DISPUTES

Terrorism

The issue of terrorism has been one of the major elements of Iran–US conflict since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Iran has been labeled as a “State sponsor of terrorism” by the US government since January 19, 1984.¹ Washington’s primary claim is that Iran has given material, political, and logistical support to militant groups in the Middle East. Tehran continues its support for militant groups battling Israel, including Palestinian group Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran considers these Palestinian groups to be freedom fighters, whose struggles are viewed as a legitimate means to liberate their lands, and Hezbollah as a group fighting to preserve Lebanon’s integrity against Israeli threats and invasions.

This labeling of Iran has in return prompted Tehran to not only object to these accusations but also seek to uncover evidence of US aggression that would justify applying the same designation to the United States. Accusations going back and forth have not only derailed attempts at rapprochement but also sidelined the areas where both countries see eye to eye. It has negated the fact that Tehran and Washington share the same principles in the fight against global terrorism, including rooting out the most extreme terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and extremist Salafi groups. It is important to fully comprehend both sides’ accusations, but since the goal of this book is to provide a better understanding of the Iranian side, their views will be explored more fully.

The American/Western view of Iran’s role in terrorism

The West, particularly the United States, has long accused Tehran of masterminding terrorist acts, and has branded it as the leading state sponsor of terrorism mainly due to its support for groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad.² Since the 1979 Revolution in

Iran, American presidents and high-ranking officials have at various times referred to Iran as a “rogue state,”³ an “axis of evil,”⁴ a “pariah state,”⁵ and a “state sponsor of terrorism.”⁶

The following is a list of some of the major terrorist charges levied against Iran:

The Beirut military barracks bombing

On October 23, 1983 twin truck-bombings occurred targeting the US and French military barracks, with a total of 299 killed, among them 241 US military personnel. The US accused Iran of aiding the bombing.⁷ Hezbollah⁸ and Iran both denied any involvement, with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati saying, “We deny any involvement and we think this allegation is another propaganda plot against us.”⁹

Khobar Tower bombing

The US accused Hezbollah and Iran of the June 25, 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US Air Force personnel and injured 372 others. Iran maintained its innocence.¹⁰

Killings of dissidents in Europe

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a slew of murders throughout Europe of Iranian dissident figures placed considerable pressure on Iran–Europe relations since all the assassinations were attributed to the Iranian government. The most prominent of these murders were the assassination of the leader of the Kurdish opposition group Abdolrahman Qassemlou in Vienna on July 13, 1989; the assassination of the Shah’s last prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, in Paris on August 6, 1991. The most serious assassination incident was that of the killing of Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders at the Greek restaurant Mykonos, in Germany, on September 17, 1992. The eventual Berlin court verdict on April 17, 1997 accused factions within the Iranian government of responsibility for the murders.

Support for militant groups in Lebanon and Palestine

The West, specifically the US, has blamed Iran for providing support for organizations such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad, groups that advocate an all-out struggle against Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and oppose the current Middle East peace process. All three groups are designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) by

the US State Department and as such constitute part of the “war on terror.”¹¹ Iran has never denied its support for these groups.

Suicide bombings in Israel

The Islamic Revolution marked a severance of Iran’s ties with Israel, followed by unequivocal condemnation of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land as unjust. Iran was therefore prepared to support resistance movements dedicated to liberating the Palestinians’ land. Yet by adopting such a policy, Tehran came under tremendous pressure from the main ally of Tel Aviv, the United States. With respect to the suicide bombings in Israel, the following story is enlightening.

It is no secret that a major obstacle to Iran–US rapprochement is Tehran’s stance toward Tel Aviv and the Middle East peace process, and their backing of Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups. During my tenure as Iranian ambassador to Germany (1990–7) I learned that many German politicians believed that from a broader geopolitical perspective, it would be conducive to Iran–US rapprochement if Tehran were able to reduce tensions with Israel. To that end, in a March 1996 meeting with senior members of the German Chancellor Kohl’s office, I was told that an initiative by Iran to manage a humanitarian exchange between Hezbollah and Israel would facilitate a positive change in relation to the perceived position of Iran in the Middle East peace process, and would also reduce Tel Aviv’s grievances and fears. Furthermore, it would facilitate rapprochement between Iran and the United States mediated by Chancellor Kohl. The Germans were indeed confident that the US would come to the table if Iran was to take this step.

A subsequent visit to Tehran and meetings with senior Iranian officials, followed by my meeting with the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in Damascus, led to progress, focused on efforts to secure the bodies of two Israeli soldiers and Antoine Lahad’s South Lebanese Army (SLA)¹² militiamen held prisoner in Lebanon in exchange for the bodies of Lebanese soldiers, and the release of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners. In a lengthy meeting with Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus, we finally agreed on the exchange and its details. I left immediately for Bonn to make the final arrangements with the German Chancellery. While my focus was on negotiations between Tehran and Hezbollah, the Germans assisted with coordination with the Israelis, eventually leading to one of the largest humanitarian exchanges between Hezbollah and Israel on July 21, 1996. One of my main objectives in this process was to facilitate the mediation efforts of Chancellor

Kohl between Tehran and Washington. This initiative included a comprehensive package covering major issues such as terrorism, the peace process, and WMD, with Chancellor Kohl mediating the details between presidents Rafsanjani and Clinton, while I served as the main contact point.

It was at this critical point in the rapprochement effort that numerous suicide bombings took place throughout Israel, including Tel Aviv.¹³ Iran was accused¹⁴ of being the backer of these terrorist acts. However, the timing of these bombings—in the midst of Iran’s efforts to reduce tensions with Israel and thus the United States—clearly illustrates that a charge of Iranian involvement makes no sense, since it was contrary to these efforts. Nonetheless, these events derailed the highest-level political efforts aimed at rapprochement between Iran and Washington.

Support for extremist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranians were accused of complicity in providing extremists with the lethal weapons and training they needed to carry out attacks on US and Allied forces.¹⁵ These accusations followed Iran’s comprehensive cooperation with the United States to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan and subsequent assistance with the overthrow of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein—two ardent enemies of both Tehran and Washington. Yet, according to the State Department annual Country Report on Terrorism 2011, “Iran continued to provide lethal support, including weapons, training, funding, and guidance to Iraqi Shia militant groups targeting U.S. and Iraqi forces, as well as civilians,” while in Afghanistan they provided “training to the Taliban on small unit tactics, small arms, explosives, and indirect fire weapons, such as mortars, artillery, and rockets.”¹⁶ The former US Director of National Intelligence, Michael McConnell, commented in June 2007 that “the evidence is overwhelming in the Iraq situation support [for terrorists by Iran], and it’s very plain and, to me, compelling in Afghanistan.”¹⁷ Iran has repeatedly denied involvement in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁸

Assassination attempt on US soil

In October 2011, the US government accused Iran of masterminding an assassination attempt on the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US, Adel Al-Jubeir. They alleged that Iranian-American Mansour Arbabsiar, a used car salesman nicknamed “Jack” by his friends because of his love of Jack Daniel’s whiskey, had recruited Mexican drug traffickers to kill

the Saudi ambassador.¹⁹ Iran categorically denied the accusations, and “the US version of events” was met with skepticism “both from sympathisers of the Iranian regime and its opponents.”²⁰ Professor Juan Cole, a Middle East and Iran expert, wrote:

1.5 million dollars is the claimed price for killing the ambassador of the biggest petroleum reserve on the planet in the capital of the world’s largest weapons manufacturer along with ubiquitous and innocent doll faced Americans in a “fictional restaurant” serving pork chops with freedom fries. But wait a minute, what else can 1.5 million dollars buy? Well it can buy you a medium sized apartment in Tehran or a Bugatti supercar, the kind that drug dealers buy for their girlfriends, or perhaps a nice European painting by an obscure artist.

Any self-respecting drug dealing gang makes more than a million dollars a week on any busy street in a big city. The gang at the center of this controversy, the Zetas, are estimated to have an annual revenue of over 40 billion dollars ... And the 100,000 dollar down payment means just one minute of their usual time ... One wonders why would these guys even talk to an Iranian moron who cannot wear matching socks, loses his cellphone in public toilets, is high on whiskey all the time, smokes cheap pot, and is basically a fat 56 year old guy who is broke and has not killed anyone in his life and has no useful skill set.²¹

These events occurred at a time when Iran had made major overtures in relation to its dispute with the West on the nuclear dossier and also in an attempt to revive rapprochement efforts with Washington. Some months prior to the assassination plot, five significant developments occurred during Ahmadinejad’s presidency: 1) in February 2011, Iran invited the US Representative in Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, for talks on cooperation in Afghanistan; 2) in July 2011, Iran welcomed the “Russian Step by Step Plan” on the nuclear dossier which addressed all of the West’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear activities; 3) in August 2011, Tehran offered the IAEA full supervision of its nuclear program for five years; 4) in September 2011, Iran freed the American hikers who had crossed into Iran from Iraq and been charged with espionage; and 5) in September 2011, Tehran offered to halt its enrichment of uranium to 20 percent and limit its future uranium enrichment to 5 percent, if provided with fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor.²²

These overtures were unprecedented during Ahmadinejad's period in office since 2005, occurring over a short time span and coinciding with headway being made on the nuclear dossier with the P5+1 and the IAEA, and positive overtures to Washington in order to advance rapprochement. These efforts were ruined by the assassination attempt on the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US. What could Iran have gained by committing such a gross act of terrorism, other than more international isolation and increased hostility from the United States and Saudi Arabia? The only rational explanation is that either a) the whole episode was a fabrication to isolate Iran even further or b) it was a false flag operation by the ultimate beneficiaries of such a terror plot.

The Iranian point of view

The history of terrorism has left a major mark on the psyche of Americans, especially following the 9/11 attacks, yet for decades Iranians have had to face a heavy toll from terrorism in their country. Some of the groups involved in this activity—according to internal reports prepared by the Iranian security and intelligence services as well as Western media revelations²³—were supported by the US government. Surprisingly, the issue was even raised in Congress. During a Congressional hearing in April 2006, former US Congressman Dennis Kucinich stated, “There are reports that the US is fomenting opposition and supporting military operations in Iran among insurgents groups and Iranian minority ethnic groups, some of whom are operating from Iraq. The Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, PJAK, is one such group, and the other group is called the MEK, the Mujahedin-e Khalq. It is an Iranian anti-government group, which was listed as a terrorist group by the State Department from 1997–2012.”²⁴ Additionally, according to a report in the *New Yorker*, US intelligence sources have indicated US financial, equipment, and tactical support for the PJAK, with the aim of placing internal pressure on the Iranian government, the same sources also claiming that the group was provided with “a list of targets inside Iran of interest to the US.”²⁵

Furthermore, the Baluchi militant Salafi group named Jundullah has conducted deadly attacks within Iran, targeting civilians and key political figures. The Salafi movement is aligned with the thinking of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Examples of Jundullah terrorist attacks include the bombing of a school for girls in the city of Zahedan in 2007²⁶ and a deadly bombing that killed almost 40 Iranians during a ceremony for the martyrdom of a revered Islamic saint, Imam Hossein,

in the city of Chabahar in 2010.²⁷ Abdolmalek Rigi, the leader of Jundallah, was eventually arrested in February 2010. Subsequently, Iranian authorities provided extensive evidence of foreign intelligence agencies' cooperation with Rigi in carrying out terrorist acts within Iran. In a detailed confession released by the Iranian media, Rigi divulged, "One of the CIA officers said that it was too difficult for us to attack Iran militarily, but we plan to give aid and support to all anti-Iran groups that have the capability to wage war and create difficulty for the Iranian system."²⁸ Further reports revealed that the CIA gave support and supplied money to Jundallah, which conducted raids into Iran from bases in Pakistan,²⁹ while an article in *Foreign Policy* claimed that operatives of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency had posed as CIA agents when attempting to recruit members of Jundallah for attacks against Iran.³⁰

Terrorism in Iran has claimed the lives thousands of civilians and more than 200 members of government, including a former president, prime minister, members of parliament, and military officials. Others, such as the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and former president and speaker of parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani, have suffered injury at the hands of terrorists. Iranians therefore know all too well the effects of terrorism, and the Iranian government was the first in the Islamic world to extend its condolences to the US following the 9/11 attacks, with President Mohammad Khatami stating, "On behalf of the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic, I denounce the terrorist measures, which led to the killing of defenseless people, and I express my deep sorrow and sympathy with the American people."³¹

US covert support for separatist groups within Iran was detailed in a 2008 *New Yorker* report by Seymour Hersh, which revealed the involvement of the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and Special Forces. Hersh claimed that the United States was supporting several groups engaged in acts of violence inside Iran:

The use of Baluchi elements, for example, is problematic; Robert Baer, a former C.I.A. clandestine officer who worked for nearly two decades in South Asia and the Middle East, told me, "The Baluchis are Sunni fundamentalists who hate the regime in Tehran, but you can also describe them as Al Qaeda."³²

Hersh added that other groups, such as the Jundallah, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), and the MEK had been or were currently supported by the United States.³³ According to another Hersh

article, the MEK had been provided with training and access to covert military operational knowledge inside the US, at Department of Energy sites in the state of Nevada.³⁴

The policy of covert operations and support for opposition groups did not change during President Obama's tenure; in fact, at times it accelerated, as revealed in a 18-month-long investigative report by David Sanger of the *New York Times*: "From his first months in office, President Obama secretly ordered increasingly sophisticated attacks on the computer systems that run Iran's main nuclear enrichment facilities, significantly expanding America's first sustained use of cyber weapons."³⁵ The same report uncovered the close cooperation between the US and Israeli intelligence agencies in using covert operations against Iranian targets: "[T]he N.S.A. [National Security Agency], and a secret Israeli unit respected by American intelligence officials for its cyber skills, set to work developing the enormously complex computer worm that would become the attacker from within."

The Islamic Republic also maintains that Israeli and US agents have co-opted terrorist groups such as the MEK to conduct a slew of attacks on Iranian scientists and bombings of Iranian military and industrial sites. To date, four Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated, while the former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, has been injured.³⁶

Anti-Israel movements

The Iranian government has supported the Palestinians' struggle against Israeli occupation, and, in response to the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, has also had supported Hezbollah since its foundation in the 1980s. While both Hamas³⁷ and Hezbollah³⁸ enjoy widespread support within their constituencies—winning elections and participating fully in the politics of their respective countries³⁹—Iran has played a major role in transforming these groups into more inclusive socio-political movements eager to engage in the political process. However, instead of welcoming the willingness of two groups to embrace non-violent political activities, the US maintained its hostile stance. America could change the political environment in both Lebanon and Palestine by recognizing the democratically expressed will of the people, thus helping to consolidate the position of the two groups within democratic process. Instead, US foreign policy in the Middle East region, characterized by unconditional support for Israel, has only made matters more complicated.

No doubt Hamas and Hezbollah have military wings that conduct

operations against Israel and to date are in fact the only groups that have successfully resisted Israel's military onslaught. The acts of state violence against civilians in Palestine and Lebanon carried out by the Israelis have provided further justification for Tehran's resolute support for both Hamas and Hezbollah, a situation that is likely to continue in the future. There is therefore the need for a more pragmatic approach to dealing with groups that have extensive support and are elected representatives and seen as advocates of the Palestinian cause. American backing of Tel Aviv, regardless of the international outcry at the atrocities committed by the Israelis, has alienated the US in the region and contributed to the perception that Israel and the United States pose the biggest threat to peace and security. This conclusion is reinforced by the results of the poll conducted in the Middle East by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, involving 12 Arab countries that account for 84 percent of the region's population—the biggest-ever survey of its kind. The poll found that 73 percent of respondents considered Israel and the US to be the biggest threat in the region, with Israel seen as a greater threat than Iran by a ratio of 15 to 1.⁴⁰

The Secret Mission to Jeddah and the Khobar Bombing

The Khobar terrorist attack occurred in 1996, the final year of Rafsanjani's second term. Iran was accused of complicity in the incident by the US. But the bombing happened at a time when Iran had made major progress on bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, not seen since the Islamic Revolution. I was involved in that rapprochement effort, and what follows is an account of my secret mission to Saudi Arabia.

After the Iran–Iraq War, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were deeply troubled due to the enormous financial assistance that the Saudis had provided for Saddam Hussein between 1980 and 1988. In a meeting in the mid-1990s, Rafsanjani told me that during a conference of Islamic country leaders, Crown Prince Abdullah, whom we called Amir Abdullah in Iran (and who became king of Saudi Arabia in 2005), had met with him. Rafsanjani, recalled the encounter:

Ignoring all the formal protocols, Amir Abdullah followed me to my car and sat down inside. He then followed me to my room where we

had a long, cordial talk. I realized that he was sincerely looking for friendly relations with Iran. During our discussions, Amir Abdullah asked me to send a representative to Saudi Arabia with enough authority, to solve the problems between our two countries.

Rafsanjani decided to send me as his representative to Saudi Arabia. The trip was informal and not intended to be publicized. I told him that I knew little about the Arab countries and that Iran would be better served by another diplomat more experienced in relations with the Arabs. He countered with vigor that *that* was exactly why I should go! His fear, as he explained, was that a seemingly more appropriate diplomat would get wrapped up in the details with the Saudis and derail what should amount to a broad, general discussion, thus preventing any meaningful outcome. "What I need," he said, "is first, a grand agreement, and then we'll get into the details. I will send Mehdi, my son, with you as a signal for intimacy."

The person that Amir Abdullah introduced as his representative contacted me and asked me to meet directly with Amir Abdullah in Casablanca, Morocco. Surprised, I asked, "Why Casablanca?" He told me, "Amir is on his summer holidays and wants to see you there." I told him that I did not have a visa and asked, "What shall I say I am doing there when I arrive in Casablanca?" He responded, "Just get a flight and come to Casablanca. Leave the rest to us." I flew to Frankfurt, and from there to Casablanca. Upon landing, cars waited for us by the plane. Nobody checked my passport and we went directly to Amir Abdullah's palace, no more than five minutes' drive away.

Abdullah was waiting for me in a vast hall. He was very welcoming. We talked for almost four hours about the history of grievances between our two countries, about the region's general political situation and its future, and grounds for cooperation. But primarily, this was a review of the previous 15 years of bitterness. At the end of our meeting, he told me that our talk was informal. "I just wanted to test your level of knowledge and your vision." He then said that our formal talks would take place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He said, "Bring your wife to Jeddah, too. You are my guests."

One month later, I again went with Mehdi to Jeddah. We flew from Germany and upon arrival, were put up in a super-luxury room in a top-notch hotel. That night we rested and the next morning, after breakfast, we readied ourselves to hear from the Crown Prince. Strangely enough, we heard nothing until the evening. After such hospitality in Casablanca, I was surprised and somewhat insulted not

to have heard from anyone until 9:00 p.m. when someone called and told me to be ready in two hours. We were completely confused by the timing of this meeting. We expected to have a brief courtesy meeting to get reacquainted that day, and that we would start the talks the following day. They told me on the phone that we were going to Amir Abdullah's residence.

It was spring 1996. Abdullah wore casual dress and told me that he was ready to conduct talks. We talked until 4.00 a.m. After the talks, I asked our contact why we had not started until 11.00 p.m. and he informed me that when the weather gets very hot, they rest during the day and work at night.

We talked about all dimensions of the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including security, economic, political, and cultural concerns. I soon realized that his biggest concern was that of security; in particular the allegation that Iran was involved with the Shias who resided in the oil-rich Saudi region, a development that could potentially threaten the stability of the Saudi regime. In response, I shared Iran's concerns about the alleged involvement of Saudi Arabia in Sunni regions such as Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and the oil-rich Arab region of Khuzistan. I told him that "Our intelligence has concluded that you fund our enemies to destabilize the country," but he denied this.

I proposed that we make a grand bargain to address all of our concerns within the framework of a cooperative security committee comprising a delegation from both countries. The committee would meet every six months or on an annual basis and any concerns could be presented in a documented fashion by one party to the other—and it was the obligation of the accused side to remedy the situation or refute any charges. I told Abdullah that this type of cooperation could ultimately become the foundation for a security pact between our two countries. I also suggested that the respective foreign ministers should meet every six months and that the heads of state should meet every two years until relations were normalized. I further proposed that investors be empowered to secure work permits and invest in each other's country. This had not happened before, even under the Shah. Abdullah was extremely amenable to the plan, so we proceeded to draft prepared a preliminary agreement covering 15 areas.

Amir Abdullah told me to meet Nayef Bin Abdulaziz, Saudi Arabia's Minister of the Interior, to discuss the security aspect of the agreement in greater depth, and also proposed a short meeting with King Fahd, during which I could outline our agreement. He said, "Then, the ball is in Ayatollah Khamenei's, Ayatollah Rafsanjani's, and your court."

My next task then was to present the draft agreement to Tehran and convince them of its merits.

Following my meeting with Amir Abdullah, I met with Nayef. The meeting was extremely challenging, as was a night-and-day difference between the approach of the Crown Prince and the Saudi Minister of the Interior. Amir Abdullah had been extremely cooperative and receptive, whereas Nayef was staunch, detail-oriented, and from his body language, appeared highly cautious and distrustful, if not disinterested. I found him to be quite radical but because of my agreement with Abdullah, Nayef could not ultimately stand in the way.

Finally, I met with King Fahd, with seven or eight people from the King's court also in attendance. I presented a brief review of the agreement with the Crown Prince, and then King Fahd spoke:

Mr. Ambassador, anything you have agreed with Amir is acceptable to me. The future of this region depends on relations between the main pillars: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq—three regional powers. With Saddam, we both have problems at this point. But Amir Abdullah has my full support to restore relations with Iran.

During that last meeting, Amir Abdullah called me by my first name. He said to me, "You are a Hashemite, you are a son of the Prophet.⁴¹ I trust you like *my* son." I asked him, "Why don't you pay a visit to Iran?" He replied, "Let me tell you something privately. Buy a piece of land for me by the Caspian Sea.⁴² I will build a palace there. I will also marry a Shirazi girl,⁴³ all of this to show that I want Iran to become my second home." He added, "Any price you tell me for the land, I trust you 100 percent. I will immediately send you the money." I thanked him for his trust and told him that what he had said led me to believe that he wholeheartedly desired the restoration of Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran.

Upon my return to Tehran, I met with Rafsanjani and Velayati, the Foreign Minister. I briefed them about my trip to Jeddah, and Rafsanjani said he agreed 100 percent with the points that I had discussed and agreed on with Amir Abdullah. He also agreed that Amir Abdullah's closing words held the same significance for him as they did for me with regard to restoring and improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Rafsanjani said he would discuss the agreement with Ayatollah Khamenein and two days later was able to inform me that Ayatollah Khamenei agreed with all 15 parts of the agreement concluded with Amir Abdullah. I then informed the Saudis about our plan's positive reception by Iran's leaders.

After receiving Tehran's stamp of approval, both countries agreed to revive relations. The package that I finalized with Amir Abdullah not only encompassed reviving bilateral relations, but also covered regional and international issues pertaining to the entire Islamic world. There is no doubt that such an agreement would have contributed enormously to regional peace, security, and stability. Furthermore, in the months that followed, Amir Abdullah and I agreed that our two countries would also cooperate in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to ensure stability of the oil market and also security of passage at oil transit points. As the two leading Islamic countries representing the Shia and Sunni populations, our partnership also had the prospect of contributing to the reduction of sectarian tensions in the Islamic world. It is against this backdrop that the Khobar bombings occurred.

On June 25, 1996, a massive truck bomb exploded at a housing complex in the city of Khobar, Saudi Arabia, located near the national oil company (Saudi Aramco) headquarters of Dhahran. The bomb killed 19 and injured 372 Americans,⁴⁴ along with several other nationals. The US accused Iran of involvement in the terrorist attack.⁴⁵ The Clinton administration's repeated mention of these accusations meant that the US missed a unique opportunity to work with the only reformist president that the Islamic Republic had produced up to that point. At this critical juncture, with relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia restored at the highest political levels, it was completely unfathomable that Tehran would have approved or been involved in such an act of terrorism that was bound to destroy all efforts that had been made toward rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. No rational analysis could conclude that Iran had been involved in this attack.

In 1997, while I was head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Supreme National Security Council, the Iranian intelligence assessment pointed to al-Qaeda and other radical Sunni Salafists as the agents behind the Khobar bombing, their aim being to force the US into removing its military presence from Saudi soil and the Arabian Peninsula. Further, they intended to undermine the improved relations between the Shia and Sunni powers of the Islamic world. The Iranian intelligence findings also hinted that a deal between Amir Abdullah and Shia representatives in Saudi Arabia had been close to being sealed, which would have paved the way for an extension of further political and social rights to the disfranchised Saudi Shia population. An important concession by Riyadh in the deal would have permitted the Shia population to participate in economic activities from which

they had previously been barred, including involvement in the lucrative oil industry. There were also reports that Saudi authorities had been engaged in private talks with their Iranian counterparts, expressing their dissatisfaction with the US position of implicating Iran in the bombing.

Bin Laden had the clearest motive as well as the operational capability to carry out the attack. He was clearly at war with the US. In November 1995, only months before the Khobar bombing, a car bomb was detonated at the Office of the Program Manager of the Saudi National Guard (OPM SANG)⁴⁶ in Riyadh. Members of the Saudi National Guard were trained at that location by the Americans—five of whom were killed that day.

During an interview published in *al Quds al Arabi* on November 29, 1996, Bin Laden said, “We had thought that the Riyadh and Khobar blasts were a sufficient signal to sensible U.S. decision-makers to avert a real battle between the Islamic nation and U.S. forces, but it seems that they did not understand the signal.”⁴⁷

Fast forward to 2007—*Reuters* reported that former Defense Secretary William Perry “says he now believes al-Qaida rather than Iran was behind a 1996 truck bombing,” in Khobar. “We probably should have been more concerned about it at the time than we were but in the first term we did not see Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida as a major factor, or one that we were concerned with,” Perry said.⁴⁸

The Khobar terrorist attack significantly affected the relationship between Iran and the US for several years. It marked the point of failure for rapprochement efforts made by both sides throughout Bill Clinton’s second term as president, a period that coincided with the emergence of Mohammad Khatami’s reformist government. This era seemed to offer a golden opportunity to make peace, but it was lost again amidst American misanalysis of the situation.

The Mother of All Disputes: The Iran–Israel Conflict and the Middle East Peace Process

During the presidency of Rafsanjani, the issue of the Middle East peace process was of primary concern to the US and lay at the heart of its conflict with Iran. America’s view is that Iran supports Islamic resistance groups who endeavor to sabotage the so-called Middle East peace process between Israel and the Palestinians and that such efforts may eventually undermine the existence of Israel.

Any analysis of this situation first requires an answer to the question, “Why *is* the Iranian *nezam* hostile towards Israel?” In this respect, the following points should be considered:

- Israel is a non-Muslim state that has taken over Muslim lands by force, with the support of world powers. Neither the Palestinians, nor the Arabs and Muslims as a whole, bear any responsibility for the mass murders carried out by the Nazi regime in Germany against the Jews, gypsies, communists and others during the Second World War. The responsibility for those horrible crimes against humanity that took place in Europe lies with their perpetrators. Iran’s government considers it unjust that Palestinians should be uprooted from their homes and nation in order to compensate the victims of Nazi atrocities. The creation of millions of new victims in Palestine, in order to compensate the victims of past crimes in Europe, runs counter to reason and morality.
- As an Islamic state, the Iranian government’s hostile position toward Israel is also rooted in two major religious factors. First, the Quran teaches that Muslims may resort to armed struggle when they are compelled to leave their homes, as illustrated in the following verse: “Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked because they have been oppressed—Allah indeed has power to grant them victory—those who have been unjustly driven from their homes, only because they said: ‘Our Lord is Allah’” (22.39–40).

Despite the fact that millions of Palestinians are scattered throughout the Middle East and around the globe, Israel denies Palestinians the right to return to their homeland. In contrast, Israel’s government continues to encourage Jewish immigration to their country from all over the world, offering financial incentives, job placements, and housing grants. The Israeli Law of Return grants every Jew, wherever he or she may be, the right to come to Israel as an *oleh* (a Jew immigrating to Israel) and become an Israeli citizen—effective on the day of arrival in the country.⁴⁹

The second religious factor in the dispute between Iran and Israel is the occupation of Beit-ol-Moghadas (Jerusalem). Jerusalem is considered the holy city for all Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism, *and* Islam. For Muslims, Beit-ol-Moghadas and the Al Aqsa mosque in particular carry major

significance—the first is the belief that the Prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h.) ascended to heaven and back from the Al Aqsa mosque following his journey from Mecca in one night, otherwise known as the Night Journey. Meanwhile, the original Islamic *Qibla*, or direction of prayer, was towards the Al Aqsa Mosque until the Prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h.) in a revelation from God was instructed to change the direction to face the *Kaaba* in Mecca.

- During the Shah's rule in Iran, Israel maintained very warm and close relations with him. Israeli interests in Iran, as a non-Arab state, became prominent as early as the 1950s, when Mossad cooperated with the CIA in establishing Iran's brutal secret service, the SAVAK. A 1979 CIA report noted that "The main purpose of the Israeli relationship with Iran was the development of a pro-Israel and anti-Arab policy on the part of the Iranian officials. Mossad has engaged in joint operations with SAVAK over the years since the late 1950s."⁵⁰

The closeness and cooperation between Israel and the Shah was deeply offensive to the religious forces operating in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini's June 3, 1963 speech, which many analysts identify as the event that ignited the first widespread, religious-political movement that led to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, sparked three days of serious rioting throughout Iran. The theme of the speech was, "The Shah and Israel; the root of people's suffering in Iran." Ayatollah Khomeini had said on that occasion:

I was informed today that a number of preachers were taken to the offices of SAVAK and were told that they could speak about anything they chose other than three subjects: they were not to say anything bad about the Shah; not to attack Israel; and not to say that Islam is endangered ... Israel does not wish the Quran to exist in this country. Israel does not wish the *ulama* [high ranking clergy] to exist in this country. Israel does not wish to see Islamic precepts in this country. It was Israel that assaulted the *Madrasa*⁵¹ by means of its sinister agents. It [Israel] wishes to seize your economy, to destroy your trade and agriculture and to appropriate your wealth. Anything which proves to be a barrier, or blocks its path, is to be removed by means of its agents. The Quran is blocking its path; it must be removed. The religious establishment is blocking its path; it too must be removed; *Fayziya* [*Madrasa*] is blocking its path; it must be destroyed. The religious students might later prove to be barriers; they must be flung from the roof

and their arms and necks broken. We are affronted by our very own government, which assists Israel in achieving its objectives by obeying her command.⁵²

The Iranian leadership is firmly of the belief that Israel's long-term goal is either to destroy the Islamic world or to silence it, creating a resistance-free environment for aggression and expansion.

- One of the primary objectives of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian Revolution's leader, and his followers within the revolution's leadership, was to revive "Islam's dignity." Israel's aggressive policies toward the Palestinians and apparent general disrespect for Muslims has fostered a hatred of the Israeli government, especially its hardline elements. The apparent willingness of the United States to offer Israel unconditional support in these circumstances only makes anti-Israel and anti-US sentiment more entrenched. As a consequence, the view of the Iranian *nezam* might be summarized as follows: "After more than forty years of occupation; demolition of people's homes in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip; and the humiliation and oppression of the Palestinians, who played no role in the atrocities against the Jewish people, the US government—under the influence of Israel—exhibits no sign of sympathy toward the Palestinian people and their plight. Instead, the US steadfastly supports any action of the Israeli government." Stephen Walt, the respected American academic, has echoed this view:

The protracted failure of U.S. policy on the Israel–Palestine issue [goes] back several decades. That's not news, of course. What has changed in the past few years is that the [Israel] lobby's operations and its harmful influence are now out in the open for all to see, which makes it almost impossible to make the old arguments that Israel is a "vital strategic asset" or a country that "shares our values" with a straight face, or to convince anyone who's not already in agreement ... The United States has backed Israel no matter what it did because AIPAC and the other groups in the lobby have enormous influence inside the Beltway [i.e. Washington] and use that political muscle to defend Israel whenever its government's policies clash with America's interests.⁵³

America's position, as described, has served only to intensify the degree of hostility between Iran and the US on the one hand, and Iran and Israel on the other. Contrary to the American calculation, its own policy

has in fact become a major obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East. Unqualified and consistent support for Israel is undoubtedly a major reason for the growth of anti-American sentiment and Islamic extremism throughout the region. As long as this dynamic remains unchanged, hardliners in Iran will remain relevant and more effectively be able to plead their case for non-compromise and non-cooperation with the US.

In the majority of UN Security Council resolutions relating to Israel, the United States has been Israel's lone supporter. Resolutions have therefore been blocked—many relating to attempts to halt Israeli military action or its policies, or to provide humanitarian aid—by America's unyielding position in relation to Israel. A quick look at the history of US vetoes in favor of Israel, from 1972 to 2011, confirms that Washington's support for Israel supersedes any consideration of humanitarian needs. The following are a few examples of the application of the US veto power in favor of Israel:⁵⁴

- 1985 UNSC Draft Resolution condemning Israeli action against civilians in Lebanon.⁵⁵
- 1985 UNSC Draft Resolution condemning repressive measures by Israel against the Arab population.⁵⁶
- 1988 UNSC Draft Resolution urging Israel to abide by the Fourth Geneva Convention, by rescinding the order to deport Palestinian civilians, and condemning the policies and practices of Israel that violate the human rights of the Palestinian people in occupied territories.⁵⁷
- 1997 UNSC Draft Resolution demanding that Israel halt illegal settlement construction in east Jerusalem and throughout the occupied territories.⁵⁸
- 2006 UNSC Draft Resolution demanding that Israel stop the bombing of Gaza and its associated military operation.⁵⁹
- 2011 UNSC Draft Resolution condemning all Israeli settlements established since 1967 as illegal and calling for an immediate halt to all settlement building.⁶⁰

On June 14, 1994, Iran's Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, met with the German Foreign Minister, Klaus Kinkel, to discuss the Middle East peace process in detail. Kinkel told Velayati that the peace process was in its final stages and that the only country opposing it was Iran, but also noted that Iran's support was critical to the success of the process. In response, Velayati said that the Europeans did not fully comprehend

the realities of the region and that Iran was not the main obstacle to the success of the peace process. Velayati said that Iran would not impede the peace process but wanted to express its viewpoint. From Iran's perspective, the peace process was far more complex than was implied by the West's "silver bullet" approach to peace and security in the region—but if the West did indeed believe that peace was imminent, then, Velayati promised, Iran would not obstruct it, but would respect whatever the Palestinians decided. Two decades later, Israel continues to building new settlements in the occupied territories.

The Obama administration also tried its hand in the Middle East peace process, advocating direct talks between the Palestinians and Israelis.⁶¹ President Obama's efforts thus far have failed, but there are signs that this administration is adopting a more critical stance towards Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's flouting of international law. In response to the Israeli government stepping up its illegal settlement-building program in the West Bank, the Obama administration publicly expressed its dismay at Tel Aviv's actions:

We are deeply disappointed by [the] announcement about accelerated housing construction in Jerusalem and the West Bank ... Unilateral actions work against efforts to resume direct negotiations and they do not advance the goal of a reasonable and necessary agreement between the parties.⁶²

Secretary of State John Kerry reinforced that view, remarking in November 2013 that "We consider now, and have always considered, the settlements to be illegitimate,"⁶³ and warning Israel, in February 2014, that it faced an economic boycott if it failed to reach a peace accord with the Palestinians.⁶⁴ To ignore the root cause of failure in the peace process between Palestinians and Israel, while vilifying Iran as *the* obstacle to ending the conflict, only exacerbates the situation. It ensures the endurance of the decades-old conflict between Palestine and Israel, and the continuation of turbulence in the region in general. Hoping to sweep away any prospects of an Israeli–Palestinian peace deal, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has emphasized the apocalyptic threat supposedly posed by Iran. This move is intended to divert the spotlight from Tel Aviv's ever more aggressive actions against the Palestinians, as more land is seized and settlements established.

As the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas, declared, "The peace process is clinically dead and Israel bears full responsibility."⁶⁵ This sentiment is shared by much of the international community, in

view of the Israeli government's acceleration of settlement construction and disregard for its commitments and obligations under international law and other conventions.⁶⁶

The Islamic Republic's position on the question of a durable peace was outlined by Ayatollah Khamenei in his address to the 16th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Tehran on August 30, 2012:

We have put forth a just and entirely democratic solution. All the Palestinians—current citizens of Palestine and those who have been forced to immigrate to other countries but have preserved their Palestinian identity, including Muslims, Christians and Jews—should take part in a carefully supervised and confidence-building referendum and choose the political system of their country, and all the Palestinians who have suffered from years of exile should return to their country and take part in this referendum and then help draft a Constitution and hold elections. Peace will then be established.⁶⁷

Cooperation, non-interference, and peace

If the international community wishes to achieve a long-lasting solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, it needs be just and acceptable to Palestinians. In this respect there is a role for Iran to play, especially in relation to its influence with certain anti-Israel groups. The US could concurrently exert meaningful pressure on Israel. Cooperation between the US and Iran therefore holds great potential for progress in the Middle East Peace Process.

Iran has often indicated its willingness to refrain from interference that might adversely affect the peace process. During high-level talks with the Germans, including the Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry, Reinhard Schlagintweit, I repeatedly confirmed Iran's readiness to support any possible solution acceptable to the Palestinians. Similarly, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Vaezi, offered the same assurance to his counterparts in the "critical dialogue" meetings between Iran and the EU troika which were held semi-annually. In fact the Iranian Supreme Leader publically has confirmed that Iran would not impede any settlement which would be acceptable to the Palestinians.

Let's Talk About Human Rights

Human rights violations and a lack of democratic values in Iran have been a constant theme in the West's critiques, particularly those of the United States, of Iran's government. The Iranian government, in turn, has underlined the politicization of the issue and pointed to the West's dismal human rights track record, especially in the Middle East. Both sides also claim to be champions of universal values, justice, equality, and dignity. In the absence of cordial relations between Iran and the United States and the wider West, the issues of human rights and democracy have become entangled in the web of bilateral disputes.

Within Iran, there is a debate amongst political decision-makers on how to address the issue of human rights. There are some who adamantly believe that the West seeks to impose their own version of human rights at the expense of Islamic values. Proponents of this view are reluctant to accommodate a Western interpretation of human rights and will not succumb to pressure—specifically on issues such as hijab (the wearing of a scarf or veil) and corporal punishment. Another school of thought recognizes the innate differences between Islamic and Western values. However, adherents to this view advocate religious coexistence through interfaith dialogue that would produce a better understanding of cultures, religions, and values, and thereby reduce the existing gap between Islam and the West. By identifying common ground and addressing differences, their aim is to align themselves with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The main areas of agreement pertain to issues such as the illegality of torture, legal representation, and an independent judiciary and laws to ensure that no detention is based on political ideology. Where differences remain, the focus is on seeking to understand and accommodate such cultural variety.

The latter school of thought was dominant during Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97), when the government, judiciary, and Foreign Ministry supported international cooperation on human rights issues. Moreover, the Supreme Leader backed increased cooperation with the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The UN Special Representative for Iran from 1986 to 1995, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, was the first such permitted to visit Iran in 1990, and on two subsequent occasions during his tenure of office. His visit to Iran from January 21 to 28, 1990 was coordinated with the Iranian government and provided him with access to prisons and prisoners, judiciary representatives and

senior government officials. Following his visit, Pohl's report on the human rights situation in Iran was presented to the United Nations General Assembly.⁶⁸ The report detailed the concerns of the international community in relation to human rights violations in Iran, with emphasis on the penal code, corporal punishment, lack of legal representation, confessions under duress, and women's rights.⁶⁹

While serving as the Iranian ambassador to Germany, I organized several seminars on Islam, human rights, and the West. Participants included officials, lawyers, religious figures, media representatives, and academics from both Iran and the West. These seminars clearly had a significant impact on both Iranians and the Western participants, which accorded with the objective of the seminars, which was to develop a comprehensive dialogue between the two sides. However, certain interest groups in the West were opposed to this type of dialogue, and applied tremendous pressure to have the proceedings halted, particularly following the Mykonos assassinations and similar events. Such incidents hampered our efforts to forge close cooperation on matters of religion, human rights, and other issues.

On June 8, 1992 we finalized plans for a seminar following my meeting with Lothar Wittmann,⁷⁰ the Director General of Cultural Policy at the German Foreign Ministry. That seminar, on Human Rights in Islam and Christianity, took place in Hamburg and was attended by more than 50 high-level officials and scholars from Germany and Iran. The discussions were enlightening on the legal, religious, and political aspects of Islam and Christianity, showing the similarities and differences, and advancing cooperation and tolerance amongst religions.

Following the success of this seminar, there was an clearly expressed desire from both Germany and Iran to continue the inter-religious dialogue. This led to a number of joint seminars in the following years, with a wider scope of topics and participants not only from Germany but other European countries. These seminars also facilitated the participation of high-level Iranian religious figures, politicians, and scholars. Up to the end of my ambassadorial tenure in Germany in 1997, five major inter-religious seminars were conducted throughout Germany and Iran.⁷¹

On April 27, 1993 Rouhani, the secretary of Supreme National Security Council and the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the parliament, proposed bilateral cooperation on human rights to German officials. Rouhani also reassured Germany that Iran would never send commandos to kill Salman Rushdie⁷² and would respect international norms in this matter.

Rouhani also brought forward the need for inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Muslims on human rights values in order to advance peace, security and stability in the Middle East.

During President Rafsanjani's era, Dr. Rajae Khorasani's,⁷³ head of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Iranian parliament, made a four-day visit to Bonn from May 16, 1994, during which he engaged in extensive discussions on human rights issues in the Bundestag, the German Foreign Ministry, and the Interior Ministry. In these discussions, Khorasani's primary focus was on the need to depoliticize the human rights issue, but he also expressed the need for the West to remove their double standard on human rights. He exemplified the latter point by noting the West's inaction on human rights violations in countries such as Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia because they were US allies, while the West had also stayed silent on the mass violation of human rights in Iran during the Shah's era, since he had been installed by the West and was a close ally of the US. Dr. Khorasani contrasted the West's attack on Saddam for launching a few missiles against Israel, while taking no action to prevent him from launching 1,800 scud missiles and chemical weapons against Iran, which had killed and injured tens of thousands of Iranian civilians. The West had even supported Saddam in this gruesome act by supplying him with weapons. Dr. Khorasani concluded by saying that the West's behavior had convinced Iranians that the West was not interested in advancing human rights but only using it as a foreign policy instrument to further its own interests.

Ali Akbar Velayati, the then Iranian Foreign Minister, had mentioned to me that Iran was keen to establish a forum for dialogue and cooperation with the European Union on human rights issues, as well as on terrorism, WMD, and drug trafficking. I relayed this proposal to the Political Director of the German Foreign Ministry, Hans-Wilhelm Theodor Wallau⁷⁴ on October 24, 1994, but he told me that the proposal had already been considered by the EU Commission and rejected. He also revealed that German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel had been very positive about the initiative, but due to Washington's opposition, the EU had felt obliged to reject it.

Yet again, Washington had prevented possible progress on human rights and other matters of international concern, a trend that would continue and add further pressure on those within Iran who had staked high political capital in an attempt to establish cooperation on these sensitive issues. With every missed opportunity, the hopes for rapprochement steadily declined.

As the above developments unfolded, Iran's government came to the conclusion that a secret hand was directing US foreign policy in the Middle East—and that hand belonged to the Israel lobby. The interests and objectives of this political force coincided with those of the traditional hawks in the US establishment, but mainly in the US Congress. In June 2013, after Hassan Rouhani's election, a congressional staffer noted that "US legislators are partial to piling on more sanctions because it has a high political payoff in terms of satisfying lobbying groups."⁷⁵ The ultimate objective of this political dynamic, when it comes to the question of Iran, in the view of Iran's Supreme Leader, is regime change. And so the vicious cycle, of hostility from one side begetting hostility from the other, continues. As we will see in the next chapter, even when power in Iran changes hands and the moderates gain more control over foreign policy, the traditional hawks in the United States in tandem with the pro-Israel lobby ward off any Iranian moves towards rapprochement with America. This in turn means that even if Iranian moderates win office and shape the administration, the failure of diplomatic overtures strengthens hardline opposition in the country. As a result, moderation is relegated to the margins of the foreign policy discourse in Iran.

Chapter 8

ROAD MAP TO PEACE

Anatomy of the Iran–US Conflict

Iran's attempts to block US hegemony in a region which, due to its vast energy resources, is of significant importance to US national interests and security has been a major cause of tension and conflict between the two states. Iran seeks to tip the existing "balance of power" in the Middle East in its favor, thus securing a leading role in the Islamic world. But it is necessary to consider whether this aspect of Iran's foreign policy is defensive or offensive in nature. I would argue, as other analysts do,¹ that Iran's strategy is defensive and that it is responding to security challenges that it sees arising from aggressive US policies.

Since 1979, the US has maintained a heavy military presence close to Iran's border and regularly used the mantra that "all options are on the table" in relation to Iran. Iran sees her relationship to the United States as a quest for survival, not for expansion. Despite this defensive posture, however, Iran still seeks to be, as they have been historically, a regional power and respected as such, and this goal continues to drive its foreign policy. Some Iranian elements argue for a more proactive policy against US interests, as long as America is seen to be acting contrary to Iranian interest in the region—but this is very much a minority view and not one that impacts on Iran's national security strategy. This is evidenced by the fact that under every Iranian presidency since the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Iran has made significant rapprochement efforts towards the US. However, the reconciliatory moves during the presidencies of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad, as detailed in earlier chapters, were spurned by America.

Undoubtedly, the competition over power and interests is a principal source of conflict between Iran and the US, but does not in itself explain why the two countries have not been able to engage in a process of comprehensive meaningful dialogue in 34 years aimed at détente and minimal cooperation. Even advocates of *Machtspolitik*² do not rule out negotiations between adversaries. In this respect, the Iran–US

relationship is unusual. The US policy approach that denied Iran's legitimate rights under the NPT and that insisted on the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment program delayed a nuclear deal for ten years, primarily because, in the absence of any meaningful direct dialogue, no sort of compromise was attainable. Yet, several conciliatory attempts initiated by both governments attest to the fact that both Iran and the United States have a desire for, and place value upon, improving relations.

A clash of cultures,³ or *kulturkampf* (also known as a "clash of civilizations"), might be another explanation for the conflict between the US and Iran. Some analysts argue that the core values which shape the Iranian system's ideological base (Islam), and the liberal values on which US society and its political system are based, are inherently antagonistic. According to Bernard Lewis, who coined the term "clash of civilizations," the US is "the great Satan" in the eyes of the Iranian leadership because of its role "as the preeminent power of the West and the ultimate custodian of Western values."⁴ By including Iran in the "axis of evil," President George W. Bush defined the conflict between the US and Iran as an inevitable clash between two mutually exclusive worldviews: a clash between good and evil.

Because political leaders in the US are often seeking popular approval, American cultural values have a direct impact on American policies toward Iran. However, many of those liberal values contrast sharply with the conservative values of Iran's religious leaders. The clergy who are represented by the Supreme Leader (*vali-e' faqih*), and their grassroots supporters, reject Western liberal values and view them as contrary to their own religious and national principles. For example, issues such as sexual freedom, alcohol consumption, women wearing revealing clothes, and the separation of religion and state are matters that clearly set Iran apart from America. Iranians look to their own history and centuries-old civilization for guidance on these and other matters.

While a clash of cultures undoubtedly plays a role in the Iran-US conflict, evidence also suggests a significant level of ideological tolerance, if not flexibility, indicating that the foreign policies of the two states are not simply driven by their value systems. Saudi Arabia and many other US allies in the Middle East clearly violate liberal values, but Washington has maintained strategic relations as well as long-standing economic and defense ties with them. In April 2011, days after the Saudis sent troops into Bahrain to crack down on the pro-democracy demonstrators, former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with

King Abdullah. After the meeting, he told reporters, “It was an extremely cordial, warm meeting. I think the relationship is in a good place.”⁵ Gates added that he did not raise any concerns with Abdullah about the Saudi troops in Bahrain. American ideological flexibility even extends to Iran on occasion, as exemplified in the change from President Bush’s “axis of evil” characterization to President Obama’s offer to engage with the same “evil” for a “new beginning.” Ironically, as Rouhani tells us, even President Bush made a rapprochement effort in 2004.⁶

A closer examination of Iranian foreign policy reveals that in many cases, pragmatism and national interest has superseded Islamic ideology. For instance, despite the fact that communism is accepted as the number one ideological enemy of Islam, Iran has maintained good relations with China and North Korea. Iran also has much better relations with Armenia than it does with Azerbaijan, despite the latter having an overwhelming Shia majority. Moreover, despite cultural differences, Iran maintains diplomatic relations with European and other “non-Muslim” countries that are culturally closer to the US than the Islamic world. Two particular episodes highlight this pragmatic approach on the part of Iran: first, in turning a blind eye to China’s oppression of Uighur Muslims; and second, in its neutral position on the war between Russia and the Muslim Chechen rebels, which Iran characterized as an “internal affair” of Russia’s.⁷

Iran has even offered to cooperate with the US on a number of occasions. Examples include the 2003 “grand bargain” offer;⁸ the provision of active intelligence and logistical support during the US-led operations to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan; the contribution at the Bonn Conference of 2001 to the formation of the new Afghan government; and the readiness for détente with the US (regarding American hostages in Lebanon and the secret arms deal) during the Iran–Iraq War. A less-noted and publicized overture from Tehran was the message that Rouhani sent to President Bush in 2004. In his memoir, ElBaradei recalled, “I had brought with me a written message ... But neither Bush nor Rice seemed, at that time, open to such [a] prospect.”⁹

Another explanation for the Iran–US conflict is Iran’s hostile stance towards Israel (and vice-versa). This certainly appears to be an obstacle to an improvement in Iran–US relations, but it is not necessarily a barrier to the establishment of a sustained dialogue aimed at détente. Some argue that until Iran recognizes Israel as a state, peace between Tehran and Washington will be impossible. This argument ignores

the fact that there are 57 members in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and only 11 of them have recognized the state of Israel,¹⁰ but it is also true that many of them have been less threatening than Iran in their public pronouncements on Israel. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have not recognized Israel, but maintain friendly relations with the US. And let us not forget that until 2012, the United States had an embassy in, and diplomatic relations with, Syria, arguably the most hostile country toward Israel in the Arab world.

It is unlikely that the Iranian government will accept normal relations with the US in the short term.¹¹ On February 17, 2014, at the commencement of new round of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, repeated his pessimistic view about the possibility of *détente* with the US and a nuclear deal with the US-led West.¹² Addressing a large number of visitors from Iran's northwestern Azarbaijan province in Tehran, he reminded the audience about US policy over the previous 80 years, including the waging of numerous wars, the massacre of innocent people, the support offered to cruel dictators, the killing of tens of thousands of people in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and, last but not the least, helping to form the extremist Takfiri groups and supporting them. In the light of this experience, he asked, "How can one change such an ugly and criminal face when it comes to relations with the Iranian nation." He continued: "Some statesmen in the previous and the present governments imagined that if we negotiate with the US, the problem will be solved; [in response] I stated that I didn't have any objection to negotiation over the nuclear issue due to their insistence, but I stressed right then that I was not optimistic ... even if the nuclear issue was resolved exactly the way the US wanted, the Americans would seek other excuses [for conflict]."

Yet, the Leader emphasized that his words should not be interpreted as an end to the nuclear negotiations, pointing out, "What the foreign ministry and government officials have started with regard to the nuclear talks will continue and Iran will not violate what it has started, but everyone should know that the US in essence feels enmity towards the Islamic Revolution and Islam and this enmity will not end with the talks."

However, the direct talks that began in the latter part of 2013 raised hopes that some steps toward normalization might be taken if the two parties could reach a final deal on the nuclear issue. It is noteworthy that no Iranian leader has ever permanently ruled out a relationship with the US. Ayatollah Khamenei stated that when the day

arrives that relations with the US are beneficial, he “will be the first one to say that relations should be established.”¹³

Why is Peace between Iran and the US Necessary?

The current state of relations between Iran and the United States is uncertain and unsustainable. The two countries are locked in a “spiral conflict” which, if not addressed, could well end in a destructive, most-likely protracted war. Both parties constantly fuel the mutual ill feeling, based on a combination of fact and fiction.

The current deadlock reflects the polemics of two adversarial doctrines. Many Americans base their policies on the assumption that Iran’s government will surrender once sanctions threaten their survival.

My career experience makes me certain that the popular American perception of sanctions is misjudged: *Iran will not bow to coercion*. Contrary to the claims of some US lawmakers and Israeli officials, sanctions only produced a dramatic rise in nuclear capability, as Tehran sought to demonstrate that it would not succumb to pressure. Iranians are not prepared to retreat because they believe that to do so would mark the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic. The Iranian leadership argues that every concession made under duress will simply encourage the US to demand more concessions until the *nezam* is toppled.

Meanwhile, US foreign policy on Iran and public statements by US officials, particularly with respect to the nuclear issue, almost entirely ignore the significant influence of national pride in Iran’s response. The West formulates political decisions predominantly on cost-benefit assessments, as does Iran. This is what provides the rationale for America’s sanctions policies, according to high-ranking US officials, including President Obama.¹⁴ Iran has shown that it understands the cost-benefit principle, as demonstrated by its adherence to well-established policies, including that relating to the NPT, despite the immense pressure that US-led sanctions have imposed on that country. However, what US leaders have failed to appreciate is that the Iranian government’s pragmatism and cost-benefit analysis recedes under intimidation, coercion, and humiliation. Traditional Iranian culture is fiercely resistant to humiliation, regardless of the cost. This culture is seemingly incomprehensible and alien to most American analysts and policy-makers, even though Americans themselves strongly dislike being humiliated, ignored, or pressured.

In relation to the whole sanctions issue, it is perhaps instructive to study the “Joint Plan of Action,” relating to Iran’s nuclear dossier, agreed in Geneva on November 24, 2013 between Iran and the world powers. The ultimate goal of the plan was to reach a mutually acceptable, long-term, comprehensive solution to the problem of Iran’s nuclear program, specifically to ensure that it would be exclusively peaceful and allow Iran to fully enjoy its right to nuclear energy, including enrichment, under the relevant articles of the NPT. To achieve these objectives, Iran was prepared to stop enriching uranium beyond 5 percent; “neutralize” its stockpile of uranium enriched beyond its domestic needs; give IAEA inspectors greater access to its nuclear sites; and have no reprocessing and no further development of the heavy water facility in Arak. In return, the world powers would undertake to impose no new sanctions and, in addition, provide limited relief from existing sanctions.

The US Congress maintains that Iran was brought to the negotiating table in November 2013 as a result of sanctions,¹⁵ but while it is true that Iran wanted to find a way to end sanctions, this argument is flawed because it ignores a number of factors. First, before sanctions even started, while I was a member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team in March 2005, Iran had expressed its readiness to adopt measures similar to those specified in the November 24, 2013 agreement between Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva. The 2005 overture included implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol that permits on-site snap inspections; limitation of the enrichment program, capping it at 5 percent; conversion of all the enriched uranium to fuel rods; and a guarantee that there would be no reprocessing and plutonium separation at the heavy water reactor in Arak, south-west of Tehran—a process that could have facilitated weaponization. Tehran also suggested measures to guarantee the permanent ban on developing, stockpiling, and using nuclear weapons, all in exchange for respect for its right to enrich uranium under the NPT.¹⁶

The talks in 2005 failed as a result of the US and the world powers insisting on Iran being prevented from exercising its legitimate rights to enrichment. The Geneva agreement eight years later made provision for “a comprehensive solution [that] would involve a mutually defined enrichment program with practical limits and transparency measures to ensure the peaceful nature of the program.” If the US and world powers had not previously denied Iran a civilian nuclear power plant and access to international nuclear fuel market, there would not have been an enrichment facility in Iran. Moreover, if they had accepted this

in 2003, the crisis in relations between Iran and the West, in particular the US, could have been avoided. It was the permission to enrich that clinched the deal in Geneva, not years of draconian sanctions. As Mohamed ElBaradei the former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) rightly penned “It took the West a decade to realize that bare-knuckle competition for regional influence was not a viable strategy for dealing with Iran. The recent interim agreement, facilitated by Rouhani’s low-key diplomacy, could have been reached 10 years ago.”¹⁷

The key point is that after six years of unilateral and multilateral sanctions, the world powers signed a deal based on Iran’s March 2005 proposal. Sanctions resulted only in a dramatic rise in Iran’s nuclear capability, as Tehran sought to show it would not yield to pressure. Where Iran had once enriched uranium below 5 percent purity possessing 3,000 (164 operative) centrifuges and a small stockpile of enriched uranium, today it enriches up to 20 percent at two sites possessing 19,000 (9,000 operative) centrifuges, possessing a stockpile of 8,000kg of enriched uranium and a more sophisticated generation of centrifuges.¹⁸

During the 2003–5 nuclear talks, I told my European interlocutors that Iran would not comply with the will of the United States, such as halting its nuclear program, because to do so would be to destroy the authority and stature of Iran’s leadership among its grassroots supporters. The cost of submission is simply too high to countenance. Iran’s leadership has identified itself with resistance to *global arrogance*, and it views America’s stance not simply as one of asking the Iranian leadership to change its behavior, but rather to change its identity. The fact that US demands are presented in a bullying, threatening, and intimidatory fashion does not help—and will not work.

In his op-ed April 23, 2014, ElBaradei, an Egyptian politician and diplomat, the former chief of the IAEA who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, wrote:

It took the West a decade to realize that bare-knuckle competition for regional influence was not a viable strategy for dealing with Iran. The recent interim agreement, facilitated by Rouhani’s low-key diplomacy, could have been reached 10 years ago.

Many believe that a comprehensive settlement of differences between the US and Iran is impossible, and this prophecy of failure tends to be self-fulfilling. But if the direct nuclear and diplomatic talks between

Iran and the US fail, and if no comprehensive agreement between Iran and the US and the world powers is reached in a timely manner, sanctions will inch closer towards crippling the Iranian government. Then, one of two scenarios will likely occur.

The first scenario is that, as the pressure from sanctions increases over time, patience for a lengthy diplomatic process may finally wane and the US policy of imposing pressure aimed at forcing Iran's surrender may be supplanted by military confrontation. The other possible scenario is that the Iranian government will eventually perceive themselves as "backed into a corner" with nothing more to lose and their republic's survival in jeopardy. At that point, they will adopt retaliatory measures against US interests in the region, hoping to change the status quo through the endurance of temporary pain while administering pain to the other side for their own long-term gain. This will end in a calamitous, regional war—a war that in former American Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's words will "consume the Middle East in a confrontation and a conflict that we would regret."¹⁹

A war between Iran and the US will most likely do serious damage to Iran's infrastructure and claim a large number of Iranian lives. On the other hand, the same war will have dire consequences for the security and interests of the US, Israel, and the entire West, the costs perhaps ten times those paid by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁰ Furthermore, such a war will not be confined to the territory of Iran, but will most likely cover much of what is arguably, in terms of US interests, the most important geostrategic region of the world. The security of energy resources and the safety of sea lanes for the steady flow of oil in the Persian Gulf will certainly be interrupted for a time.

Some American experts assert that Iran would be unable to close the Strait of Hormuz,^{21 22 23} which is probably true. However, it is also true is that Iran would be capable of disrupting the safe and secure passage of vessels that transport nearly 40 percent of the world's seaborne oil exports. Zbigniew Brzezinski, currently a senior research professor of international relations at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, said in an interview in July 2012, "We would open it [Strait of Hormoz] by force — and we have the power to do it, and I'm fairly confident we would do it ... but let's not be simple-minded about it. We can open it up, but you can be absolutely certain that the costs of oil will skyrocket because it will still be a dangerous passage." In their book, *War With Iran: Political, Military, and Economic Consequences*,²⁴ Geoffrey Kemp and John Allen Gay have demonstrated how Iran can, by adopting asymmetric

tactics utilizing not-so-sophisticated instruments spread out over days and weeks, destabilize Hormuz, thus causing a significant surge in oil prices.

A war between Iran and the US would most likely involve many countries in the Middle East, including the Arab states and Israel, ultimately bringing about new waves of extremism and new life to jihadists, as well as chaos and instability across the region for many years into the future. Former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates once remarked that bombing Iran would “create generations of jihadists, and our grandchildren will be battling our enemies here in America.”²⁵

If the US were to launch a high-intensity war on Iran, the outcome would not likely be the collapse of the Iranian government but rather Iran’s withdrawal from the NPT, an acceleration of its nuclear program towards weaponization, and an unstable Middle East, including America’s Arab allies, already vulnerable due to the “Arab spring.”

Hypothetically, if a US attack were to bring about the fall of Iran’s current system, the lack of an alternative government would cause the country’s descent into chaos. This would lead to a situation not unlike that experienced in other parts of the region, such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Iran would become another failed state alongside all the others from Afghanistan to Lebanon, further destabilizing the entire region and becoming a home to international and regional terrorist organizations. Iran would become another refuge for organized crime, especially a major route for drug trafficking between Afghanistan and the West, as well as a center for the production of drugs. Chaos and civil war would spill into Iran’s neighbors and disrupt them. And, the price of oil would skyrocket unpredictably for a lengthy period.

Hostile relations between Iran and the US have also had a significant effect on relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors in the region. Strained relations between Iran and the Arab countries has resulted in the waging of dangerous proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, with no prospect of peace in sight. Ironically, extremists who are supported by conservative Arab countries are, by nature, the arch enemies of both conservative Arab rulers and the United States. Supporting these ruthless groups is, as a Persian saying has it, “tantamount to raising a snake in your own sleeve.”

Another negative effect of a confrontational relationship between Iran and the US is the intensification of the hostility between Iran and Israel, which may ultimately transform from a war of words into one of military confrontation. It is true that Iran–Israel relations have been problematic at best since the Iranian Revolution, but the situation has

deteriorated in response to the worsening relationship between Iran and the United States. Thus another potentially dangerous front has opened up in the Middle East. The US has made little to no effort to diffuse the Iran–Israel situation; indeed the US government’s policy of unconditional support for Israel has only strengthened the position of Israeli hardliners.

The current trend in Iran–US relations will only exacerbate the hostility between Iran and Israel, possibly to an explosive point. This does not mean that if tensions between Iran and the US diminish, Israel and Iran would become friends. Rather, it means that if Iran and the US were reconciled, the spiraling conflict between the Iran and Israel would likely lose momentum. After all, it is only relatively recently—mainly since the emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005—that Israel and Iran have threatened each other militarily.

Last but not least, the ever-escalating animosity between Iran and the US has strengthened radicalism in Iran which advocates “inherent, irreconcilable antagonism between Iran and the United States.” For example, President George W. Bush’s condemnation of Iran as part of the “axis of evil” gave Iranian radicalism the upper hand in both domestic politics and in Iran’s foreign policy. President Hassan Rouhani, indeed, campaigned against “securitization of the country” during the 2013 Iranian presidential election.²⁶

Hostile US policies have convinced Iran’s Supreme Leader that the policy of “threat against threat” is Iran’s sole option in dealing with America. If this phenomenon continues, it may escalate the Iran–US conflict to a state of war. Taking advantage of the situation, while tension between Iran and the US heightens, hardliners are certainly capable of mobilizing their ultra-conservative grassroots supporters, known as *kafan pooshan* (those who wear a shroud as a symbol that they are ready to fight to death for their cause), for violent confrontations with the enemy both inside and outside of their country.

Peace between Iran and the US is the Rational Choice

The rewards of a peaceful relationship between the two states would be significant for both countries. For Iran, the first and foremost benefit, it would mean the end of US policies aimed at “regime change,” resolving the biggest concern of the Islamic Republic: security of the *nezam*.

Iran remains embroiled in tense political relationships with the Western countries. Peace with the US would open the door

to normalization of relations with other Western countries. If that occurs, then Iran would be ultimately relieved of the burden of sanctions imposed by the UNSC, European countries, and the US. Unemployment and inflation in Iran are rampant and economic growth is stifled. Although this situation is due in part to mismanagement during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight years as president, sanctions are in large part responsible for Iran's economic problems. Reconciliation between Iran and the US would give the former access to foreign investment and trade. Lack of investment in the country's oil industry not only deprives Iran of a vital source of revenue, but in the long term will make it an importer of oil, according to a senior Iranian energy official.²⁷ The country requires at least \$200 billion in investment to upgrade and expand its run-down oil and gas industry.²⁸ According to Iran's former Oil Minister, the annual investment needed to save Iran's oil infrastructure is 2.5 times greater than the country's total annual development budget.²⁹ Peace with the United States would ultimately facilitate integration of Iran's economy into the global economy, creating opportunities for Iran to diversify both its imports and its exports and become active in the Western market.

The Iranian government wants a transformation from a developing country to a developed country. To achieve this, Iran needs to open itself to the world and receive a flow of know-how, advanced technology, capital investment, and finance from the West. Iran enjoys an astonishingly gifted faculty, students, and researchers, but this pool of talent should have access to the latest scientific and technological advances. Sharif University of Technology, according to Bruce A. Wooley, a former chair of the Electrical Engineering Department of Stanford University, "has one of the best undergraduate Electrical Engineering programs in the world. That's no small praise given its competition: MIT, Caltech and Stanford in the United States, Tsinghua in China and Cambridge in Britain."³⁰ Sadly, Sharif is listed among the institutions sanctioned by the United States.

Some experts argue that the "enemy narrative" serves as a pretext for the Iranian government to crack down on dissent.³¹ The Iranian government views the issue quite differently. They say that they are not delusional about America's strategic decision to annihilate the Islamic *nezam*, claiming that regime change has been a US goal since the Islamic Republic's inception. The Iranian leadership's thinking, based on a combination of facts and fiction, is that internal dissent is intentionally or unknowingly supported by the US system to bring about regime change and restore a puppet system. In any case, peace with the

United States could diminish or eliminate Iran's phobia about being attacked by America, thus allowing the government to apply fresh thinking to the issue of dissent in Iran.

Iran is surrounded by the American military bases and their massive troop presence from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in the south, Turkey in the west, and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan to the north. "In addition, the US has close military partnerships with Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus [north of Iran], where US troops are involved in training missions, and where local facilities are used in moving supplies across the Caspian Sea towards Afghanistan."³² The Iranian *nezam* considers the US as its number one security threat. Reconciliation with the US would not only eliminate that threat, but also reduce the stress on the *nezam* and ultimately strengthen the *nezam's* legitimacy, something that is of utmost importance to Iran's government. Americans also can reap great benefits if they make peace with Iran. History shows that coercive US policies toward Iran over the past 35 years have engendered new security concerns for the Americans and heightened security concerns that previously existed.

From an economic perspective, the current state of relations between Iran and the US do not make any sense. American companies have been left out of the Iranian market for more than three decades. Yet, under Iranian law and policy, American companies can become actively involved in significant projects in various sectors of the Iranian oil, gas, and petrochemical industries. As one of the region's largest economies, Iran has lots to offer beyond oil. The country has a diversified economy and a broad industrial base and is in fact the 19th largest economy in the world based on purchasing power parity.³³ Iran's labor-rich economy with a developed infrastructure in transportation and telecommunications offers both potential and opportunity for foreign investment. Its large population of 77 million,³⁴ one of the youngest in the world, has created a huge consumer market. Its strategic location, surrounded by many countries, has put Iran in an exceptional position for trade and transit.

Peace between Iran, as a regional power, and the US, as a global superpower, would allow two states to cooperate against their common adversary, that is, Takfiri³⁵ groups (such as al-Qaeda), primarily in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but also across the region as a whole. There should be no doubt that Takfiri terrorism could soon become the number one national security threat for the countries of the Middle East, for the US, and for the world powers alike. Intelligence, military,

and logistical cooperation between Iran and the US could create unprecedented formidable force with which to confront extremism across the region. Rapprochement between Iran and the US would assist in the reconstruction of Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors and encourage those Arab countries that currently support Salafist groups proxy wars against Iran to desist from doing so.

Peace between Iran and the US will clear the path for construction of a regional cooperation system that will provide security, stability, and peace in the Persian Gulf between Iran and its neighbors, most importantly Saudi Arabia. Such a development would also secure the stable flow of oil and bring to an end the proxy wars in the region led by Iran and Saudi Arabia that could spiral out of control any moment. The US would also be able to gradually withdraw from the region, saving billions of dollars.

Peace with Iran will address the security concerns of the US with regard to Iran's nuclear activities. By creating an atmosphere characterized by cooperation, Iran would welcome close cooperation with the IAEA, implementing maximum transparency measures and adopting appropriate limits in its nuclear program. By the same token, the potential for a nuclear arms race in the region will be eliminated.

One of the most complicated issues in the conflict between Iran and the US is Iran's stance on the so-called Middle East peace process, that is, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Iran's view of Israel is decidedly unfriendly to say the least. However, there are four major reasons for the intensification of Iran's hostile stance towards Israel in recent years: 1) the US threats to the *nezam's* survival, including the imposition of paralyzing sanctions and the US adoption and articulation of its "all options are on the table" mantra, and the Israeli role behind the coercive US policies; 2) Israel's bullying and humiliating stance aimed at denying Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear technology, while Israel, despite possessing one of the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, is not accountable to any "body"; 3) the apparently unconditional US support for Israel's stance on coercive policies against Iran; and 4) Israel's involvement in the covert war against Iran,³⁶ including the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.³⁷ There is enough ammunition here for radicals in Iran to intensify country's hostile position toward Israel.

There is no doubt that the Iranian leadership dislikes the Israeli government. Refusal to recognize the state of Israel (as is the case with many Muslim countries) is one thing, but an intensified "cold war" relationship that inches toward a regional war is quite another. While

the non-recognition of Israel is as old as the Islamic Republic, the drift towards war is a relatively new condition which emerged subsequent to escalation of the crisis over Iran's nuclear program and with the emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It is reasonable to say that the escalation of the conflict between Iran and Israel centers on Iran's nuclear program, but is not limited to it. If a comprehensive, win-win deal between Iran and the US could be reached, whereby Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear technology were recognized and the program placed under strict surveillance to ensure there was no nuclear weaponization, then tension between Iran and Israel will most likely be reduced. Furthermore, if Iran's security was guaranteed as part of a comprehensive peace package, the Iranian government would not jeopardize a deal between Israel and the Palestinians if such a deal was acceptable to all Palestinian factions.

Factors to be Carefully Considered

The various analyses of the Iran-US relationship presented above give us some insight into the nature of the discord, but they do not fully explain why the two states are locked in a protracted conflict spiral predominantly characterized by *non-compromise*, despite both having indicated an interest in ending hostility towards each other on numerous occasions. During the Cold War, the West and the communist bloc employed espionage and engaged in proxy wars against each other in the likes of Nicaragua, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, while at the same time maintaining diplomatic relations across the ideological divide. But in the case of the Iran-US conflict, a combination of deep mutual mistrust, misperceptions and misanalysis by the policy-makers of the two states, and the activities and maneuverings of domestic and foreign hardliners and opponents of rapprochement have prevented the establishment of an enduring negotiation process between the two states. This, in turn, has caused the longevity of the state of non-compromise as well as the escalation of the conflict.

Mistrust between Iran and the US is a major factor obstructing meaningful and enduring talks between the two states. From the Iranian government's perspective, the United States' overriding objective in relation to Iran, since the formation of the Islamic Republic, has been regime change. Therefore, they believe that even when the Americans

smile at Iran, they hide a dagger behind their back. This deep suspicion is not only a product of misperception, but also reflects the lessons of history of the Iran-US relations, as discussed throughout the book, but also the US international conduct.

Iranian policy-makers assert, Gadhafi agreed with the US and the UK to end his nuclear program. But once the deal was done, the US and the West attacked Libya and removed him from power. More frequently referred to in private meetings is the Iraqi case. They say Saddam Hussein did not have nuclear or other types of WMDs. "What was Saddam's fate?" an Iranian high-ranking official once asked me. "The US invaded Iraq and removed him based on unsubstantiated claims of Saddam having WMDs."

The US assisted the Iraqi dictator's invasion of Iran and even his chemical attacks on the Iranians. Draconian multilateral and unilateral economic sanctions against Iran; keeping military options on the table; launching cyber warfare; employing covert operations; militarization of the Persian Gulf countries; military encirclement of Iran and promoting regional and international isolation of the country have also confirmed the Iranian leadership in its belief that the ultimate goal of the US is indeed regime change. One characteristic of US policy, which has become more visible during the leadership of President Obama, is the obvious discrepancy between words and actions. While Obama offered Iran a "new beginning," he later orchestrated the most comprehensive unilateral and multilateral sanctions against Iran and ordered a wave of cyber-attacks on Iran's Natanz nuclear facility.

Americans, of course, have their own grievances and reasons not to trust the Iranians. The 444-day US Embassy hostage-taking by Iranian militants humiliated the United States in the eyes of its own people and those of the world and violated international law, leaving Americans angry and very negative about Iran. Iranians could not see how parading the blindfolded hostages before television cameras and chanting, "Death to America, death to Carter" could hurt American feelings. According to my friend Gary Sick, Chief Assistant to President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, during the hostage crisis "the mirror image of Iranian depictions of the U.S. as the 'Great Satan' had its effects on the media, on the U.S. Congress, and on the public." Furthermore, aside from blaming Iran for terrorist attacks the sudden revelation of Iran's sophisticated enrichment installation in Natanz heightened the US mistrust of Iran.

Non-reciprocation is another is another contentious issue for Iran in relation to its view of America. During my career, I was actively engaged

in and was witness to numerous diplomatic and tactical overtures toward the United States.³⁸ In return, the United States ratcheted up the pressure. Such policies marginalized the moderates in Iran and prepared the ground for the emergence of a hardline faction with a new foreign policy agenda—that of ignoring the West’s demands, regarding the UN Security Council as illegitimate, and prioritizing relations with Eastern powers such as China and Russia.

Iranians view non-reciprocation as a sign of the American system being dishonest. However, as I was told by some informed US sources, Iranian rejection of some of the outreaches by the US, specifically President Obama’s second letter to the Iranian Leader, created a perception among American policy-makers that despite conciliatory moves from Tehran, the dominant and strategic perspective of Iran is not just one of non-compromise with America, but rather actively seeking to harm the US by damaging its interests and standing in the Middle East.

Coercive policies and the language of threat, major elements in the US approach to Iran, ignore significant cultural traits in Iranian politics, particularly the importance of pride and the strong desire for independence. For the past two centuries, Iran’s sovereignty, independence, and integrity have come under threat politically and militarily. Iran has withstood all those threats due to the culture of resistance that is deeply rooted in its culture. The Iranian power elite, across the entire political spectrum—from reformist, to moderate, to hardliner—believe in resistance to bullying, pressure, and perceived humiliation.

Iranians have shown that they understand and apply the so-called cost-benefit principle. For instance, despite intense animosity between Iran and the United States, both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei authorized relations with the United States when it was beneficial to do so. Furthermore, Iran did not abandon the NPT even though the IAEA sent Iran’s dossier to the UN Security Council, resulting in sanctions that caused the country much pain. However, this rationality and pragmatism is nullified by humiliation. Coercion and the language of threat are not only the wrong way to go about developing diplomatic solutions to disputes between Iran and America, but are in fact part of the problem because they entirely ignore the role of pride in Iran’s politics.

Iran’s nuclear program has become an important symbol of national pride. “The Iranian leadership has constantly linked Iran’s nuclear program to the nation’s pride and dignity (*ezzat-e melli*). To surrender to pressures and suspend that program is tantamount to betrayal and

abandoning the nation's dignity. In such cases, the Iranian leadership will lose its authority and stature among grassroots supporters and rank-and-file conservatives. Simply put, the *nezam* (Iran's political system) cannot afford the costs of such a decision."³⁹

The Iranian leadership also believes that to retreat under coercion would simply encourage further pressure from America, resulting at best in the Iranian system losing its independence, at worst in its downfall. In addition, the discourse of the Iranian Revolution advocates resistance to bullying and pressure from foreign powers, and is therefore sensitive to what it sees as America's real agenda in relation to Iran. "In other words, the United States is not simply asking the Iranian government to change its policy. Rather, in the Iranian view, it is asking them, in a sense, to accept foreign domination and give up their independence under coercion. What makes the matter worse is the involvement of Israel, which wants to impose a perceived humiliating compromise on the Iranian *nezam*."⁴⁰

Iran's misperceptions about the American system also abound. Some politicians in Iran view America as a declining power—one on the verge of collapse. Therefore, they argue that if Iranians resist, they will ultimately be the victor in this battle. Such politicians do not believe in diplomatic solutions, viewing an antagonistic relationship between Iran and the US as a natural state of affairs. After nearly a decade, followers of this school of thought still attack moderates for their confidence-building policies toward the West, particularly with respect to Iran's voluntary suspension of its uranium enrichment program in 2005.

This political current argues that the only way forward is to adopt aggressive policies. This school of thought accused the moderates of *vadadegi*, meaning retreat in the face of intimidation. They misanalyzed Western threats to refer Iran's nuclear dossier to the UNSC, calling it a bluff. They also underestimated the significance of the sanctions and the West's determination to impose a de facto oil embargo on Iran. This faction, symbolized by *Kayhan* editor Hossein Shariatmadai, views any deal or compromise with the US as a red line and contrary to the fundamentals of the revolution. With the emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, this group became dominant in Iran's foreign policy. As a result, hostile relations between Iran and the West—in general—and with the US—in particular—intensified, and the future appeared bleak.

The final factor identified in this book as an obstacle to the creation of an enduring and meaningful negotiation process between Iran and the US, and consequently the establishment of peace between them,

is the role of “spoilers.” These are the groups fundamentally opposed to US–Iran rapprochement, specifically the MEK, Israel, some Arab countries, and hawks in both the United States and Iran. While those in Iran hate their counterparts outside the country, they have a common objective: to obstruct peace between Iran and the US. They are motivated materially as well as ideologically.

As discussed throughout this book, careful study of the *missed opportunities* for better Iran–US relations in the last three decades reveals an astonishing pattern of active steps taken to thwart progress, initiated by the actors just referred to. They become even more active when there is optimism about talks or any other conciliatory moves between Iran and the West/US.

Creating the Road Map

After more than three decades of high-level mistrust and hostility, the road to peace between Iran and the US is truly a bumpy one. It is hard to cross but not impossible. It requires the utmost patience and vigilance. Reconciliation can come about only through an unshakable commitment to resolving the conflict, a necessary but not sufficient condition. For in truth, with the absence of a real desire for peace, no plan will work. I am confident that the dominant viewpoint inside the *nezam*, including that of the Supreme Leader, is to end the hostilities with the US based on mutual respect, non-interference, and mutual interest. From Iran’s side, there is the will to bring an end to the existing era of hostilities. What follows is based on the assumption that this necessary condition exists in the United States as well.

One of the reasons that Iran–US relations have been oscillating between hostility and short-lived positive engagement is the piecemeal approach of both sides, but mainly the United States. This approach has repeatedly failed, simply because when a small step of engagement and cooperation is not followed by bigger steps, the effects of the small step quickly evaporate and are overtaken by the major differences that persist.

There are two reasons why the blame lies chiefly with the US. First, the Americans are in the driving seat, operating at the international level while Iran is at the regional level, so the onus is on the US to initiate change. Second, the US does not appear to have a consistent comprehensive strategy regarding Iran, including how to negotiate an endgame.

American policies seem to lack coherence. For example, in 2002 President Bush included Iran in his “axis of evil,” which seemed to establish a state of perpetual war between the two countries, yet two years later he proposed an unprecedented rapprochement toward Iran, emphasizing a readiness to personally engage in talks with Iran not just to deal with the nuclear problem but to “resolve all the issues” between Iran and the US. The same inconsistency has characterized American policy during the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Obama administrations. Each of the top three nuclear negotiators during the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations proposed a broad dialogue aimed at rapprochement toward the US administrations of George W. Bush and Obama, but they were rebuffed,⁴¹ although both presidents offered reconciliation to Iran.

Unless the US endgame is a reduction of tensions with Iran—and preferably a normalization of relations—then any agreement on individual issues will be insecure and likely to be broken by one side or the other, or both. Let us assume that a final nuclear deal between Iran and the US and other world powers is reached and implemented. If the US endgame is not Iran–US détente, Congress may well pass a bill to impose new sanctions based on the pretext of human rights violations or state-sponsored terrorism. In that case, Tehran might regard the nuclear deal as simply a huge liability, offering no return, and launch retaliatory moves that would effectively end the nuclear agreement.

When it comes to the resolution of individual issues, the two countries should first agree on the end objective. In other words, each party should clearly know what it has to give and what it should expect to gain. This is an important factor which I sought to bring to the attention of US politicians and the American public through numerous lectures and articles. One of the reasons that the November 2013 nuclear interim deal in Geneva happened was that the end objective was defined. In the talks between Iran and the US during the second half of September 2013, Iranian negotiators had proposed that both parties needed to agree on the end state of a nuclear deal before seeking agreement on the first and interim steps. William Burns, the US Deputy Secretary of State agreed. Without this measure, the talks would most likely have been another failure.

In the pre-Geneva and Geneva talks, the two sides agreed to negotiate a “phased approach” toward a “comprehensive agreement.” This is the only way that the United States and Iran can deal with this diplomatic Gordian knot covering the nuclear question, WMD, and other disputes.

While working for three decades on Iran–West relations within the Iranian administration and spending four years in the US talking to foreign policy practitioners and scholars on Iran–US relations, I have come to believe that Washington and Tehran can negotiate a “comprehensive package” to ensure the “end state” and then properly implement it. I made this suggestion to Americans in hundreds of seminars, roundtables, lectures, and articles during my stay in the US.

Energizing Negotiations with Mediation

Article 33 of the UN Charter encourages the “parties to any dispute the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security [to] seek a solution by negotiation ... mediation [or] arbitration.” The conflict between Iran and the US is too important to both sides and too complex to allow it to be resolved by arbitration. Negotiation must therefore be the basic method by which the conflict is brought to a peaceful resolution. However, based on past experience and the problems discussed earlier—primarily profound mistrust, misperceptions, and a lack of mutual understanding—negotiations have mostly been short-lived and unsuccessful. To avoid repeating the failures of the past, mediation should be introduced to the negotiation process. As one of the UN Charter-enshrined methods for resolving international conflicts or preventing their escalation, mediation has strong experiential and theoretical support. Jacob Bercovitch, widely considered to be one of the world’s leading experts on international conflict resolution, defined mediation as “a process of conflict management ... where those in conflict seek the assistance of or accept an offer of help from, an outsider (whether individual, an organization, a group, or a state) to change their perception or behavior.”⁴² According to Bercovitch and Fretter, in the period 1945–2000 there were 300 international conflicts and more than 3,750 cases of mediation.⁴³ The success rate of mediation in conflict resolution has been remarkable. Based on numerous studies, Bercovitch concluded that “mediation [is] an effective strategy that can deal with all types of conflicts.”⁴⁴

When it comes to the Iran–US conflict, some may argue that representatives of a superpower and a regional power can hardly be influenced by mediators. In this respect, a few points are worthy of note. First, Iran and the US, like any other adversaries, have motives to seek help from the mediators, relating to the role that the mediators would play. Mediators are catalysts, educators about the constraints

and reasons behind one party's position on an issue for the other, bearers of good and bad news, and facilitators of a favorable climate for negotiation.

Mediators can make the parties understand each other's sensitivities, prevent the process of negotiation from falling apart, help avoid misunderstandings and misanalysis of the situation, and facilitate the continuation and endurance of the negotiations. Mediators will try to keep the win-win spirit governing the negotiations, as opposed to the spirit of a zero-sum game. Mediators can help a party to save face, suggest trade-offs, and highlight the costs of non-agreement.⁴⁵ They can also help the two parties search for common ground and enhance the attraction of certain alternatives.⁴⁶

An example of mediation in action was the role played by Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the monarch of Oman since 1970, in facilitating the recent Iran-US talks that led to the "historic" nuclear deal.⁴⁷

Reducing Conflict via Proactive Phased Measures

The June 2013 Iranian presidential election marked a profound change in attitude and approach in relation to international affairs. It reflected the desire of the nation to change course in the face of an impasse. "I'll pursue a policy of reconciliation and peace, we will also reconcile with the world," remarked Rouhani following his election. The US embraced the change, perhaps not based solely on these words, but because of Rouhani's record as a rational pragmatic politician during the 2003-5 nuclear negotiations with the EU3. In a number of secret meetings between August and October 2013, the two governments decided to tackle the impasse over Iran's nuclear program. In between, we witnessed the September 2013 telephone conversation between Obama and Rouhani, and the Zarif-Kerry talks in New York on the fringes of the UN General Assembly meeting. These were events that marked a clear break with the era of hostility that had been ushered in by the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

This chain of events also paved the way for the November interim nuclear deal in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1. Although neither of the parties said so explicitly, the move could be considered as the *first step* of a phased process toward peace. There are two reasons for such an assessment. First, is the matter of urgency: Iran-US relations have been steadily deteriorating over the question of Iran's

nuclear program. Since the US has based its policies on an erroneous perception that Iran will submit to pressure, it concluded that the only solution to Iran's nuclear crisis was to toughen the sanctions to the point of paralysis. This, as discussed earlier, will not work and will most likely end in a destructive war. Logic dictates that this process be stopped before the patience of one or both sides breaks and things spiral out of control.

Second, by agreeing a comprehensive solution to the nuclear issue, a precedent has been established to allow Tehran and Washington to begin talks and strike a deal on other disputed issues. Finding a solution to the nuclear issue has required negotiation and compromise, but has demonstrated that both countries are willing to work towards a solution. In itself, this would be a significant step forward, showing that both the United States and Iran have abandoned their so-called "uncompromising" stances. Potential agreement on the nuclear issue, therefore, could be used as a starting point to address other areas of conflict between the two nations, specifically regional competition, security-related issues, terrorism, and human rights.

A final comprehensive agreement on the nuclear issue is quite possible if it is based on four principles: 1) full transparency of Iran's nuclear program in a verifiable way; 2) adoption of measures to ensure there is no diversion toward weaponization; 3) Iran's right to carry out enrichment under the NPT; and 4) the lifting of sanctions imposed on Iran. Based on conversations with other nuclear negotiators from P5+1, I am convinced that they would accept these four principles if Iran and the US could agree on them. These four principles should then be implemented step by step, based on an equal application of the terms by both sides at each step.

As the *second step*, the group of Track II mediators could prepare a comprehensive package for peace outlining the macro demands and expectations of both parties. After review by both governments, the package could be finalized with the help of the mediators, but needs to be agreed upon by both sides. From the Iranian perspective, key requirements include American reaffirmation of its commitment from the Algiers Accords of 1981 "not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs"; respect for Iran's independence and territorial integrity; a cessation of destabilizing activities aimed at regime change; and abandonment of the language of threat and intimidation, including the "all options are on the table" mantra. The two parties could immediately begin adopting measures to

decrease tension and hostility, preparing the public of the two countries for the move toward *détente* and eventual resumption of full diplomatic relations.

Iran and the United States must immediately cease hostile rhetoric, propaganda, saber rattling, and threatening each other at the official level. Neither government can control individuals and political currents outside their authority—such as the hardliners who are able to provoke the conservative element in Iranian society, or the derogatory and aggressive remarks aimed at sabotaging the negotiations that will likely emanate from the US media—but it is vital that the governments act in a responsible manner in order to diffuse any tensions that may arise. Here, the mediators will also have a crucial role to play.

Furthermore, as an acknowledgment of Iran's past gestures of goodwill, the United States could pursue the unfreezing of Iranian assets. This could be done by means of the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague or through a legal process in America. In the case of the claims by individuals in the US courts, Iran could be permitted to file a defense against such claims.

Other practical measures that would assist rapprochement between Iran and the United States include the resumption of the sale of civilian aircraft by the US to Iran (which would enhance airline safety in Iran); US support for loans from the World Bank to assist in humanitarian projects in Iran; and US support for Iran's admission to the World Trade Organization. Interdependence reduces the risk of hostile confrontations and helps prevent military conflict.

Strengthening people-to-people relations would be vital to creating an atmosphere in which the two sides can ultimately take steps toward normalizing the relations. Easing restrictions on civilian travel for business, academic, and professional purposes would help to improve relations between the countries and would be very constructive. The resumption of exchanges (academic, professional, etc.) between the two nations and cooperation between universities and professional organizations should be encouraged. The establishment of robust exchange programs, involving students, youth, think tanks, media, libraries, NGOs, business leaders, and university faculties, would help tremendously to rebuild trust, bring together the hitherto divided worldviews, and stabilize the peace process between the two countries.

The promotion of tourism in both directions—for example, by the restoration of landing rights for commercial airlines in both Iran and the US—would help to dispel negative stereotypes and engender greater cultural awareness. Development of a a long-term, durable,

inter-faith dialogue between American and Iranian religious leaders and scholars, designed to promote peaceful coexistence between the two great religions of Islam and Christianity. This initiative under the banner of “Dialogue of Abrahamic religions” can create a better understanding, remove misperceptions, and revive friendship and peace between the two nations.

Cooperation on humanitarian issues such as fighting malicious diseases, especially cancer and AIDS, drug addiction, and environmental issues would not only be beneficial to both sides but also a major door opener to friendship and building trust. Among health-related information exchanges between the two countries, Iran’s experience on the treatment of tens of thousands of victims of chemical weapons could be valuable to the studies on the devastating and long-term effects of the use of chemical weapons on and the horrific sufferings of the victims.

Some may argue that this step is not realistic, especially from the Iranian side, where the government and conservatives do not seek such a relationship. In April 2013 I co-authored an op-ed with the former American ambassador to Ukraine, William Miller, which was published in the *Christian Science Monitor*.⁴⁸ The focus of the op-ed was “civilian diplomacy,” proposing both governments should lift restrictions to their citizens to travel to their respective countries. The article was widely reported in Iran, even by the most conservative newspapers and websites—and did not attract any criticism. It should be noted that this or similar steps should only be taken after a general agreement on peace is concluded.

Beginning Cooperation on Issues of Mutual Interest

Syria is on the verge of collapse. If mechanisms for a post-uprising transition are not immediately put in place through international effort, then the emergence of one of the two following scenarios is inevitable: a) an endless proxy war between the Syrian government, Iran, and Russia on one side, and the Persian Gulf Arab countries, Turkey, and West (including the US) on the other, with the potential of spiraling into a regional war; or b) Syria descending into total chaos and becoming a failed state and thus a haven for extremist terrorist groups and organized crime. Iran and the US, in the framework of a forum with other P5 members (permanent members of the UN Security Council), the other members of R5 (the regional powers: Iran, Iraq,

Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia), and finally the S2 (representatives of the current Syrian government, as well as of the political, military, and civilian opposition inside Syria and abroad), could draft an initiative or plan to identify concrete, pragmatic, and attainable goals relevant to both a short-term and medium-term transition from war to peace.

The plan should consist of substantive elements, such as a genuine ceasefire by all armed parties, including the Syrian government and opposition forces, fully backed and guaranteed by regional and international players; robust mechanisms for both broadening and deepening all levels of humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of civilians; identification of key steps to prevent state failure, the outbreak of sectarian violence, and civil war; the holding of free elections overseen and administered by the UN; and a national constitutional referendum based on freedom of conscience, belief, and religious practice. The example of the cooperation between Iran, the United States, and Russia which led to the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons in 2013 offers a possible blueprint—and hope—in this respect.⁴⁹

Iran and the US have common interests in jointly combating drug trafficking. One of the main sources of supply for the drugs that end up in Europe and the US is Afghanistan, via Iran. Joint efforts to stop this trafficking would be beneficial to both countries. Cooperation on halting international organized crime through existing international organizations such as Interpol and agreements between law enforcement agencies would be a good way to build trust between the US and Iran.

Cooperation on Iraq and Afghanistan would also be mutually beneficial to the US and Iran in order to assure stability and peace following the cessation of hostilities. Iran's capabilities in terms of intelligence and logistics in this area are unmatched. Mutual cooperation between Iran, the US, and Afghanistan on combating terrorism and terrorist groups, halting the trafficking of drugs, smuggling, and other criminal activities would contribute significantly to a post-war settlement the region. These three could establish a committee to facilitate cooperation on political, economic, security, crime, and reconstruction matters in Afghanistan. Similarly, Iran and the United States could assist the new Iraq to develop its social infrastructure and economy and support a durable democracy reflecting the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversities of the country. A stable Iraq would lead to a more stable region. Iran, Iraq, and the US could also establish for Iraq the type of committee envisaged above for Afghanistan.

Concluding an agreement on disputed issues such as terrorism would constitute the *third step* of the process being considered. Although the

US and Iranian governments both condemn terrorism in its individual and state form, the two differ in their definition of terrorism. The US government considers terrorism as “activities that involve violent ... or life-threatening acts ... that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State and ... appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.” Iran does not consider armed resistance by national liberation movements (such as Hamas and Hezbollah) as terrorism, but rather as legitimate political movements that have no choice but to resort to armed struggle in order to repel armed aggression or illegal occupation. With regard to the US government definition of terrorism, the government of Iran maintains that if violence against innocent civilians is one manifestation of terrorism, then all states that carry out heavy bombing of civilian areas (such as Beirut and Gaza) are guilty of state terrorism. And those who provide the weaponry or the finance to purchase such weaponry are accessories to the crime.

However there is a basis on which Tehran and Washington could agree to combat terrorism, namely UN Security Council Resolutions underpinned by UN Resolution 1373.⁵⁰ This resolution, adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter and therefore binding on all UN member states, provides the most comprehensive framework for an Iran-US agreement on terrorism. Under this umbrella, both countries would be committed to countering terrorism bilaterally, regionally, and internationally without discrimination. As the quid pro quo for Iran's cooperation in countering terrorism, America could remove Iran from the State Department's list of state-sponsors of terrorism.

In parallel with talks over terrorism, the two capitals could establish a joint commission on human rights and democracy. Such a commission, comprising distinguished citizens nominated by each country, could jointly consider and review human rights cases raised by both sides, with recommendations then made to the two governments as to further action.

Having built some mutual trust through cooperation on issues of common interest, Tehran and Washington could begin to consider other, more problematic international issues, such as *weapons of mass destruction* (WMD). This matter has been on the Western agenda since the early 1990s, and there is an urgent need for Iran and the world powers to agree on a set of principles to deal with the matter.

Moving beyond talks on the nuclear issue, the goal should be the establishment of a WMD-free zone (WMDFFZ). The revolutionary upheaval of recent times in the Middle East has shifted the priorities of regional leaders from advancing a WMDFFZ initiative to dealing with domestic issues. Rising nationalism and populist sentiments, coupled with extremism and terrorism led by radical Salafists, stand in the way of progress towards WMDFFZ in the Middle East.

A *comprehensive agreement* with Iran, however, could become a platform for a broader Middle East agenda, a road map for a WMD-free zone, and as a model as to how to address proliferation challenges in this part of the world in the future. Within such a context, as discussed in a paper published by the International Panel on Fissile Material,⁵¹ the world powers and Iran could agree on six principles covering the Iranian nuclear issue and a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East: 1) no nuclear weapons in the Middle East; 2) no production of plutonium and separation of plutonium in the Middle East; 3) a ban on cessation of the production of highly enriched uranium, and indeed with no enrichment beyond 5 percent in the Middle East; 4) no stockpile beyond domestic needs for nuclear civilian use; 5) establishment of a regional or international consortium for producing nuclear fuel; and 6) ensure WMD non-proliferation by creation of a regional authority responsible for regulating nuclear development and verifying its peaceful nature in the region.

Iran could reaffirm its adherence to all international conventions related to weapons of mass destruction such as a Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, and ratify the Biological Weapons Convention and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. It could also agree to the maximum level of verification detailed in these conventions and treaties. In return, the US could encourage UNSC member states to cooperate in peaceful technological development with Iran under the auspices of these conventions and treaties. Because a WMD free zone in the Middle East is the only sustainable long-term solution, the UNSC would be committed to making the initiative a success.

The Arab–Israeli conflict is another important area of dispute between Tehran and Washington. In what appeared to be a gesture of goodwill, Javad Zarif sent good wishes to the Jewish people for Rosh Hashanah on his Twitter page. He received a response from Christine Pelosi, daughter of US House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who said, “The New Year would be even sweeter if you would end Iran’s Holocaust denial, sir.” Zarif quickly responded, “Iran never denied it. The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone. Happy New Year.”⁵²

The government of Iran maintains that neither the Palestinians nor the Arabs and the Muslims, as a whole, have had any responsibility for the mass murders of Jews, gypsies, communists, socialists, democrats, nationalists, the disabled, or people with inherited disabilities that was systematically carried out by the Nazi regime in Germany. Iran believes that the victims of these horrible crimes against humanity, or the heirs of those victims, should receive due compensation from those responsible for such crimes committed in Europe. Iran considers it unjust that millions of people in another nation, on another continent, should be uprooted from their homes and dispossessed of their livelihood and possessions in order to compensate the victims of Nazi crimes. To create millions of new victims in order to compensate the victims of past crimes is contrary to reason, international law, morality, and simple common humanity.

Consequently, it is the view of the government of Iran that Palestine should be allowed to return to its previous status: that of a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional land governed by a single, democratically elected government. Given the bitterness of the past history and the existing conditions on the ground, the US maintains that the only way to achieve a durable and equitable settlement is by the creation of two separate states: one for the Palestinians, the other for the Israelis. In addition, the fear that Iran's military support for Hamas and Hezbollah poses "an existential threat to Israel," a close ally of the United States, needs to be addressed. Both the Iranian and US governments believe that a fair, negotiated political settlement is far more desirable than any imposed military solution. Therefore they should be able to agree on certain principles respected by the international community.

The idea that a broad framework for conciliation between Tehran and Washington, addressing Iran's security concerns, might also encompass an Iranian commitment to non-interference in the Middle East peace process, provided that any solution proposed is accepted by Palestinians, is still a feasible one. In other words, in exchange for US recognition and respect for Iran's sovereignty and interests, the Iranian government would agree not to impede or undermine any agreement reached between Palestinians or the Arab countries and the Israelis. I believe that once misperceptions are removed on both sides, Washington and Tehran might be able to agree on the following principles:

- Iran and Israel would respect UN resolutions and refrain from threatening another member of the UN.

- Iran would continue to defend the legitimate rights of Palestinians and be allowed to provide financial help for humanitarian purposes.
- The government of Iran would not attempt to substitute its voice for that of the Palestinian people, and will respect any solution that is freely chosen by the majority of that people.
- The US would commit itself to support the legitimate rights of Palestinians and the right of return to their homeland for millions of Palestinian refugees.
- The US would commit itself to support the implementation of all UN resolutions on the Israeli–Palestinians crisis.

Establishing a regional security and economic cooperation system in the Persian Gulf between Iran and its neighbors, supported by the US, would be a useful strategy for guaranteeing a durable peace between Iran and the US. The US currently spends billions of dollars on maintaining a military presence in the Persian Gulf. A considerable reduction in its forces, or even their complete departure from the region, which this type of system might make possible, would allow this money to be diverted to domestic purposes. Iran, the US, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iraq, and the world powers could cooperate to establish a regional system among themselves for maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region.

The Persian Gulf ranks among the most valuable and strategically important regions in the world because of its abundance of energy resources and its location at a vital geographic crossroads for the world's security and economy. Therefore, security, peace, and stability in this region are critical. To achieve this, Iran could join the other Persian Gulf countries (the GCC and Iraq) to establish a regional cooperation system. Inspiration might be taken from the way the EU and its predecessors brought peace and stability to Europe. A regional cooperation organization in the Persian Gulf could operate in a similar way, and also learn from other international peace and security organizations and structures such as OSCE (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), NATO, and the UN.

A “Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organization” comprising the six member states of the GCC, plus Iran and Iraq, could be established in accordance with Paragraph 8 of UN Security Council Resolution 598. The regional countries could establish “common security arrangements” within the framework of a collective security system to fight terrorism, extremism, sectarianism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and other common security concerns. The beauty

of such cooperation is that, over time, it would eliminate the various barriers that impede political, economic, and cultural cooperation, and instead assist in the promotion and development of trade and commercial relations. Free trade among regional states is a realistic goal, which in turn could enhance political relations and progress towards the goal of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. Resources that might otherwise have been earmarked for military purposes could now be diverted to economic development and alleviation of poverty, thus reducing the risk of social unrest.

Reducing tensions on the most disputed issues would open the door to business and commerce between the Iran and the United States. The year before the Islamic Revolution, the United States and West Germany had been Iran's main trading partners,⁵³ but after the revolution, the US saw its trade with Iran decline significantly. The first round of US sanctions on Iran was implemented in 1979, and these sanctions were extended in 1995, during the presidency of Bill Clinton. Since 2005, and following the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, the sanctions applied by the US and EU were expanded further, in both scope and depth. Yet up until 1992, before the Clinton administration toughened its sanctions, the United States remained Iran's sixth largest source of imports,⁵⁴ while for more than 15 years after the revolution, Germany was Iran's largest trading partner, followed by Japan, Italy, and France.⁵⁵

The imposition of US–EU unilateral and multilateral sanctions, especially after the nuclear crisis, led to a gradual decline in trade between Iran and the West, accompanied by a growth in trade between Iran and Asian countries such as China and India. Therefore, US-led sanction regimes have promoted the growth of East Asian influence in Iran, specifically that of America's rival, China. Since 2001, Chinese exports to Iran have increased nearly sixteenfold.⁵⁶ So sanctions have significantly shifted the focus of Iran's foreign trade from the West to the East (establishing a foreign trade policy of "Easternization").⁵⁷

The European Union had more than a 50 percent share of Iran's trade in the 1990s,⁵⁸ while 40 years ago over 60 percent of Iran's foreign trade was with Europe and less than 20 percent with Asia. By 2013, Asia accounted for over 83 percent of Iran's foreign trade.⁵⁹ Trade turnover between Iran and China amounted to about \$36 billion in 2012,⁶⁰ and \$40 billion in 2013, close to 50 percent of Iran's annual foreign trade. Today, China is Iran's largest trading partner.⁶¹ Moreover, in February 2014, the Iranian Finance and Economic Affairs Minister, Ali Tayyebnia, and the Chinese Commerce Minister, Gao Hucheng, signed an agreement in Tehran to double bilateral trade over the course

of three years.⁶² In fact, in response to the bullying policy of the West, Tehran repositioned itself in terms of commerce by adopting a trade policy of “Asianization” and “economic regionalism.”⁶³

Although bilateral ties between the West and Iran have been weakened dramatically, there still exists the potential to revive strategic economic links between the two, specifically the US. Past economic trends in Iranian industry and the economy as a whole stand testament to the prominence of the West in Iran’s economy. Many top Iranian businessmen are Western-educated, and even today a majority of overseas Iranian students and academics study or work in the US and other Western countries. On my trip to Iran in early 2014, I was surprised that every Iranian businessman I met was eager to establish business relations with the US. Civilian diplomacy, therefore, can contribute to a revival of the traditional industrial and trade relationships between Iran and the West.

The opening of banks and commercial entities in each country by the other should be encouraged to facilitate the export and import of goods and services. With the risk of confrontation diminished, the US government could encourage investment in gas and oil resources and in particular the pipelines that will move Central Asian oil and gas through Iran to the Persian Gulf. Developing pipelines to take oil and gas from Iran to Pakistan and India, as well as northward to Europe, could also be the type of mega projects in which American companies could participate.

In the long term, it would be useful to establish an implementation mechanism, such as a permanent joint commission, tasked with strengthening relations between the United States and Iran on all important issues, such as security, commerce, and cultural exchange. This permanent joint commission could be modeled on the joint commissions that were established with Russia, the Ukraine, and other European Nations after the end of the Cold War.

This road map could pave the way for rapprochement and the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between Iran and the US, and bring to an end 35 years of mutual hostility. But to realize this, before and above all the plannings and actions a historical, monumental step should to be taken by the two states; recognizing the other side’s grievances followed by *mutual forgiveness*.

AFTERWORD

The tension and uncertainty between Iran and the US, which has defined their relationship for the last three decades, is no longer sustainable. There are compelling arguments that these two countries stand at the crossroads between war and peace.

If the two countries fail to resolve their differences with regard to Iran's nuclear program, the US will likely impose even more onerous sanctions, aimed at paralyzing Iran's economy, but Iran will not surrender to the West's pressure. Submitting to coercive US policies to satisfy American demands is not simply about compromising on the nuclear issue. Tehran would perceive it to be a de facto abdication of the Iran's independence—and its identity. Every political faction in Iran, including moderates, believe that once the West, primarily the US, determines that sanctions can be effectively used as a weapon to bring Iran to its knees, they will employ sanctions repeatedly, either to change the *nezam's* identity and impose Western values, or to completely topple it and replace it with a puppet state.

Western use of sanctions to impose its will would leave Iranian leaders with no choice, given their values, but to vigorously confront those actions which threaten the survival of Iran using every means at their disposal. The inevitable outcome would be war. It should go without saying that this would be a costly option for both sides, indeed all of the Middle East region, with its inherent instability.

If the zero-sum game can be averted, peace between Iran as a regional power and the US as a global power could lead to the creation of a framework for cooperation that would bring stability to the Middle East, from Lebanon in the west to Afghanistan in the east. We have already seen the consequences of *hostility* between Iran and the US in broad daylight. In Syria, for example, in an attempt to curb Iran's strategic depth and influence in that country, the West/US allied themselves with an armed struggle against Bashar Assad, and thereby, as a Farsi saying puts it, "bred a snake in their sleeves." The United States misread the situation in the Middle East, specifically in Syria,

drawing in America's allies in the region, from Turkey to the rich Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia, with the intention of toppling the Syrian government by supporting armed insurgents. However, the financial aid and weapons ended up in the wrong hands. Instead of the downfall of the Syrian regime, what transpired was the birth of the largest jihadi movement, attracting jihadists from all over the world seeking to establish a state of their own. In a significant shift, in February 2014, the US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, issued an unprecedented warning about the war in Syria, citing evidence that training camps in Syria were preparing "people to go back to their countries and conduct terrorist acts [there]." Another official described the situation in Syria as a security threat to the United States.¹

Conferences and initiatives aimed at changing the Syrian regime and containing the rising number of resident extremists have failed, one after another. One reason for this failure might be due to the lack of involvement of Iran in the process. Iran is a major factor in Syria's power equation, a fact that cannot—and should not—be ignored.

US policies toward Iran created another detrimental side effect, allowing, if not encouraging, actors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey to launch a hidden war against Iran in an effort to establish themselves as regional powers. This has resulted in troubled relations between Iran and Turkey, and a dangerous, hostile posture by Saudi Arabia toward Iran, a situation exacerbated by the involvement of these two countries in the Syrian conflict. Like the US, they too must face the reality that they have inadvertently contributed to the greatest-ever gathering of terrorists.

The rise of extremism in the region is a direct threat to the security interests of Iran, the US, and undoubtedly its allies in the region and beyond. Logic dictates that in pursuit of a solution to the problem of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, who are active in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, cooperation between Iran and the US is of critical importance. A US alliance with Iran against the rise of extremism would require America to encourage its allies to abandon confrontation with Iran. The United States will not be able to build a coherent foreign policy in the region and work effectively with Tehran to root out extremism if, at the same time, its Saudi allies maintain an aggressive stance towards Iran. Iran-US cooperation would create an environment in which the GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia would be encouraged to move toward reconciliation and a resolution of their disputes with Iran, and a similar scenario would apply to the currently troubled relationship between Turkey and Iran. Simply put, Iran-US cooperation on security

issues, especially the problem of terrorism, will result in a significant reduction in other tensions in the turbulent Middle East.

Finally, we now stand on the brink of progress on the nuclear conflict. However, peace on this issue alone, ignoring other and varied disputes between Iran and Amercia, would be unstable. Any resolution of the nuclear problem should be regarded as a foundation for greater cooperation or a “grand bargain” between the two states. The dawn of a new age of relations between Iran and the United States is within sight. We can only hope that the opportunity is seized, and that the weight of history does not slow our progress on the road to peace.

NOTES

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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I discussed the idea of re-establishing Iran–UK relations, at ambassadorial level, with Rafsanjani, and he was supportive of the idea. Once we had the blessing of Rafsanjani, we approached Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who, although a radical in that time, to our surprise also had no objections and gave his backing to re-establishing relations with the UK. The last and most important authorization sought

on this matter was that of the Ayatollah Khomeini. We felt an air of anxiety as we expected the initiative to face a high degree of opposition, owing to the turbulent history of Iran–UK relations and due to British interventionist policies since the beginning of the twentieth century, which peaked in the 1953 US–UK led coup. Finally we acted, and the General Director for Western Europe, Mahmood Vaezi, and I held a meeting with Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Larijani, where we decided that Larijani would raise the issue with Ahmad Khomeini, the son of Ayatollah Khomeini and his chief of staff. Two days passed and I went to Larijani's office to hear the latest developments. While I was there, Larijani called Ahmad Khomeini on a secure line. The conversation was brief and I was not sure of the outcome until Larijani told me that Ahmad had brought up the issue with Ayatollah Khomeini and he had agreed. We had received the green light to proceed.

I relayed the good news to Mahmood Vaezi and Foreign Minister Velayati, who both welcomed the news, and shortly afterwards, Velayati sent details about the next move that involved Vaezi and I meeting with our British counterparts in a neutral location. We chose Vienna as our meeting point and the British agreed. Within days, we were heading to the Austrian capital. Upon arrival, we met with the British for a long and detailed discussion that lasted five hours. The end result was an agreement to re-establish bilateral ties at the ambassadorial level. Subsequently, bilateral relations improved, leading to the reopening of the UK Embassy in Tehran in 1988.

The broader aim of re-establishing bilateral relations with the UK was that it was seen as a means to a larger goal—the restoration of relations with the US. There was therefore a sense of optimism once relations improved with the British that we could begin to advance towards a rapprochement with the US.

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- The release of the Germans was complex, since German officials would not release the members of the Hamadi family in return for their freedom. In an attempt to broker a deal, I invited the older brother, Abdel Hadi Hamadi, to my office in Tehran in the mid-1990s, where we discussed for hours the details of the two German hostages. However, he was not persuaded and I had to follow up on the case on my return as ambassador to Germany. With close cooperation with the German officials, we got the green light to extend an amnesty to the two Hamadi brothers in exchange for the release of the German hostages, Heinrich Strubig and Thomas Kemptner, in June 1992.
- The key German officials at the time, with whom I was in constant contact regarding the case, were the Foreign Ministers Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of German Bundestag Hans Stercken, and the Minister of State Bernd Schmidbauer. I also facilitated and organized a private meeting between Hans Stercken and the elder brother, Abdel Hadi Hamadi, in Tehran in the early 1990s. Ultimately the two Germans were freed in June 1992 and the Hamadi brothers in 2006.
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- 73 Hans Wilhelm Theodor Wallau is a former German diplomat and ambassador to a number of countries

- 74 Reinhard Schlagintweit is a politician and diplomat. He served as the Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry from 1993 to 1999. He joined the Foreign Service in 1952 and was assigned to Ankara, Kabul, and Bangkok, and then served as ambassador in Jeddah.
- 75 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a political and economic union of the Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf and located on or near the Arabian Peninsula, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
- 76 Mohammad Javad Ardashir Larijani is an Iranian politician, cleric, and academic. He served as the head of the Foreign Relation Committee of SNSC of Iran and leading the Iran–German Parliamentary Friendship Group. He is currently the head of the Human Rights Council in the judiciary and was a senior adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.
- 77 Klaus Kinkel served as Federal Minister of Justice (1991–2), Foreign Minister (1992–8), and Vice Chancellor of Germany (1993–8) in the government of Helmut Kohl. Previously, he had been President of the Federal Intelligence Service (1979–82).
- 78 Bernd Schmidbauer served as Minister of State from 1991 to 1998. Previously he had been the parliamentary secretary to the Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety from January to December 1991.
- 79 Reinhard Schlagintweit is a politician and diplomat. He served as the Political Director General of the German Foreign Ministry from 1993 to 1999. He joined the Foreign Service in 1952 and was assigned to Ankara, Kabul, Bangkok and was ambassador in Jeddah.
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- 82 Mohammad Hashemi Rafsanjani (also Mohammad Hashemi) is an Iranian politician who has been a member of the Expediency Discernment Council since 1997. Before that, he served as vice president in charge of executive affairs during the presidency of his elder brother, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.
- 83 Dr. Rudolf Dolzer served as the Director General of the Office of the

- Chancellor from 1992 to 1996. He is currently the Director of the Institute for International Law at the University of Bonn, Germany. A profile is available at <http://www.mcnaairchambers.com/en/members/professor-rudolf-dolzer/profile>
- 84 Martin Indyk served as Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs during the Clinton administration. He is currently the Vice President and Director for Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC.
- 85 Salman Rushdie is a British novelist who caused major controversy with the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The book was seen by many as an irreverent depiction of the Prophet Mohammad and led to widespread protests and condemnation in the Islamic world. Ayatollah Khomeini also issued a religious decree, or *fatwa*, authorizing Rushdie's execution.
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- 88 Charles Lane, "Germany's New Ostpolitik: Changing Iran," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1995), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/51604/charles-lane/germanys-new-ostpolitik-changing-iran>
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- 90 Kamal Kharazi is an Iranian politician and diplomat who was Iran's ambassador to the United Nations from 1989 to 1997. Subsequently he served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2005.
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Chapter 5

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Some in the US and Israel maintain that Iran does not have the right to enrichment of uranium under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty (NPT). They also argue that some countries that are using nuclear power do not enrich uranium themselves but buy it from other countries that produce enriched uranium. Some others argue that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) links a member's rights to its compliance with the commitment to apply safeguards and assure the IAEA that it is not seeking weapons. Article IV of the NPT specifically lays out the rights of non-nuclear weapons states, with no exceptions. It guarantees "the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy." The right to produce nuclear energy should include the right to the production of enriched uranium as a critical component for civil nuclear power generation. Otherwise, it should have been clearly exempted. The fact that some countries choose not to exercise that right, instead purchasing enriched uranium from abroad, does not change that right. Article IV of the NPT states that "nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of this treaty." Paragraph 69 of the final document of the first United Nations General Assembly special session on Disarmament in 1978, which was adopted by consensus, states that, "Each country's choices and decisions in the field of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy should be respected without jeopardizing their respective fuel cycle policies or international cooperation, agreements and contracts for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy provided that the agreed safeguard measures mentioned above are applied."

Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands—all countries which, like Iran, are non-nuclear-weapon parties to the NPT—have uranium enrichment facilities. All five nuclear-weapon parties to the NPT—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—also have enrichment activities. Iran's nuclear program is carried out under IAEA supervision, and the IAEA has verified that no material is being diverted for military purposes.

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According to the *Washington Post*, “President Gerald Ford signed a directive in 1976 offering Tehran the chance to buy and operate a U.S.-built reprocessing facility for extracting plutonium from nuclear reactor fuel. The deal was for a complete ‘nuclear fuel cycle.’” Dafna Linzer, “Past Arguments Don’t Square with Current Iran Policy,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3983-2005Mar26.html>

- 52 Some argue that even under the Shah, the US had some concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. The reality is that the differences between the Shah and the US were related only to reprocessing and plutonium separation. There was no dispute about nuclear power plants, the enrichment process, and the Tehran Research Reactor, which used 20 percent enriched uranium. A full report published by George Washington University Archive says:

“By the summer of 1978, Tehran and Washington had overcome differences and agreed to a nuclear pact that met U.S. concerns and the Shah’s interest in buying reactors, but the agreement closely restricted Iran’s ability to produce plutonium or any other nuclear weapon fuel using U.S. supplied material without Washington’s ‘agreement.’” William Burr, ed., “US–Iran Negotiations in 1970s Featured Shah’s Nationalism and US Weapons Worries,” National Security Archive, January 13, 2009, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb268/index.htm>

This means that despite the restriction on “Iran’s ability to produce plutonium,” the Shah did not accept that Iran was denied the right to reprocess for peaceful purposes. The disagreement might have been about “using U.S. supplied material without Washington’s ‘agreement.’” Even this means that Iran could deal with other countries, such as France, and could buy nuclear weapon fuel from the US with Washington’s agreement.

A report in the *Washington Post* noted:

After balking initially, President Gerald R. Ford signed a directive in 1976 offering Tehran the chance to buy and operate a U.S.-built reprocessing facility for extracting plutonium from nuclear reactor fuel. The deal was for complete “nuclear fuel cycle”—reactors powered by and regenerating fissile materials on a self-sustaining basis. Ford’s team endorsed Iranian plans to build a massive nuclear energy industry, but also worked hard to complete a multibillion-dollar deal that would have given Tehran control of large quantities of plutonium and enriched uranium—the two pathways to a nuclear bomb. Either can be shaped into the core of a nuclear warhead, and obtaining one or the other is generally considered the most significant obstacle to would-be weapons builders. (Dafna Linzer, “Past Arguments Don’t Square with Current Iran Policy,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2005)

On October 21, 2013 I talked to Akbar Etemad, the head of the Iran Atomic Energy Organization during the Shah’s era. He told me that the president of the American company Bechtel came to Tehran and asked him about setting up a joint enrichment project. Dr. Etemad declined the proposal and told Bechtel’s president that he had already signed a contract for building an enrichment facility with French. He told me there was no depute with the US on the wide scope of the nuclear program and that Iran did not let Americans impose any cessation of reprocessing on Iran.

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Our research found three more extensive statistical analyses on the 2009 election. Ansari points to widespread fraud and casts doubt on the results (Ali Ansari, Daniel Berman, Thomas Rintou, 2009). Ansari's report is refuted by Bozorgmehr and Esfandiari (2010). Their analysis concludes that the outcome of the election was a genuine reflection of the will of the Iranian people. In another statistical analysis, Brill concluded that Ahmadinejad had been the actual winner of the election (Brill 2010).

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Chapter 7

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Afterword

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