

Iran-US Relations: Learning from Experience, Marching toward Reconciliation

Abstract

With some success in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, hopes have been raised that the US and Iran may be able to conclude a final nuclear deal and then build upon it to ultimately mend relations. Assuming that the US and Iran can cultivate the political will for normal relations, the purpose of this paper is to assist the policy makers and others to realize the shift and prepare the ground for a realistic rapprochement. With this purpose and possibility in mind, the paper offers an overview of US-Iran relations including its historical development, difficulties in the relationship, imperatives for a better rapport, and remedial prescriptions.

Introduction

With some success in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, hopes have been raised that the US and Iran may be able to conclude a final nuclear deal and then build upon it to ultimately mend relations. While such hopes are noble and may not be too illusory, they can prove impossible to realize if the two sides fail to change their old paradigms and procedures moving forward. Assuming that the US and Iran can cultivate the political will for normal relations, the purpose of this paper is to assist the policy makers and others to realize the shift and prepare the ground for a realistic rapprochement. With this purpose and possibility in mind, the paper offers an overview of US-Iran relations including its historical development, difficulties in the relationship, imperatives for a better rapport, and remedial prescriptions.

The historical dynamics of the relationship suggest that the substantive difficulties are caused by the geostrategic and political environments, conflict of interests, misuse of power, and wrong policies. A sheer misunderstanding of substantive issues, inappropriate purpose and priority, and the inability to settle with a logical procedure to engage have been equally problematic. While issues in the relations are serious, they are all negotiable, with the exception of the Islamic Revolution and its theocratic state system. However, for better relations, the complicated transnational issues involved must be addressed holistically and multilaterally. To normalize the "abnormal" relations, I offer helpful procedural considerations, a guide for bypassing the

* Professor of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, at Rutgers University, and Senior Associate Member at the University of Oxford, U.K. He is also President of American-Iranian Council, <http://www.amirahmadi.com>, email: hooshang@amirahmadi.com.

theocracy, and advice for empowering the catalysts. It is my hope that the arguments in this review will assist policymakers on both sides to shift paradigms and procedures, better appreciate the mutual grievances and concerns, and devise aims and means that might more effectively help in normalizing relations.

From amity to enmity

U.S.-Iran relations have gone through four more or less distinct periods in the last 150 years. The first period starts from the middle of the 19th century to 1953. This is the period when Imperial Britain along with Imperial Russia (before the October Revolution in 1917) were despised by the Iranian people for their interventions in Iranian affairs, while America in Iran was viewed favorably.¹ During this time there was no enmity and Americans were considered helpful to Iran. In the early stages of this amity period there were very few interactions between the two, although there were ambassadors and missionaries on both sides beginning in 1860s. The relationship between Iran and the US in this period was largely based on humanitarian, educational and religious purposes rather than political or economic intents. Iran was the recipient of American “goodwill” with little to offer in return except for a heartfelt appreciation for American benevolence. This period officially began when Iran sent its first ambassador, Hajji Hossein-Gholi Noori, to Washington. He is often referred to as “Hajji Washington” for he occasionally held Islamic rituals in a western land that was oblivious to the ceremonies.²

In 1909, an American named Howard C. Baskerville, a graduate of Princeton University, was sent by his church to serve as a missionary teacher in Tabriz. He was shot by the Russians (or the Iranian government forces) who were fighting the Iranian Constitutionalists in the city. Baskerville continued to be remembered as a hero in Iran until the British-American coup against the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953. In the 1920s, the Iranian government invited Americans, in increasing numbers, to help with the administrative work – mainly as economic administrators. Morgan Shuster is one such American but there were many even more prominent Americans such as S.G.W. Benjamin, Arthur Millspaugh and Arthur Upham Pope.³ Relations remained friendly between the two until the beginning of World War II, when the political-strategic environment changed. The Allied Forces invaded Iran, and the Americans were among the invading force. Iran was not a party to the war but notwithstanding its neutrality, the Allied Forces occupied the country in 1941, deposed the Shah Reza Pahlavi, and crowned his son, Mohammad Reza, in his place.⁴ Reza Shah was suspected of being a sympathizer of Adolf Hitler.

¹ Hooshang Amirahmadi, *The Political Economy of Iran under the Qajars: Society, Politics, Economics and Foreign Relations, 1796–1926*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2012.

² Eskandar Deldam, *Haji Washington*, Tehran: Golfam Publishers, 1371 (1992).

³ Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005.

⁴ T.H. Vail Motter, *The Persian Corridor and Aid to Russia*, Washington, DC: Center for Military History, United States Army. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952.

Prior to WWII, Iran was still under the direct British influence. Even though the country was not a colony, the British treated it as if it were a semi-colony or a protectorate. Indeed, in 1919, Britain tried to officially make Iran into a “protectorate”.⁵ Under this condition of domination, Americans with the Allied Forces, entered Iran as occupiers for the first time and used the country’s infrastructure to send military equipment to Moscow to fight the Nazis. That was the beginning of the enmity between the US and Iran partly because the occupation proved catastrophic for Iran; millions of Iranians died of starvation as food production and distribution channels were disrupted and epidemics followed.⁶ Iran became a “bridge” to victory against Nazi Germany in Russia but that proclamation helped little to redress the colossal Iranian losses. This tragic situation notwithstanding, the Americans were not still seen as occupiers in the sense of a traditional colonizer, and hostilities remained low key until the 1953 coup. After World War II, the Allied Forces were to leave Iran. The Americans remained loyal to their words but the Soviet forces stayed behind helping separatist movements in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan gain independence and join the new Soviet Union. In 1946, the Roosevelt Administration demanded that Stalin withdraw his forces from Iran and recognize the nation’s territorial integrity. Stalin, after some resistance, concurred.⁷ This memory of American support for Iran’s territorial integrity helped partly restore American good standing with the Iranians.

The world then became entangled in the Cold War and the Americans and Russians began dividing the new world into their spheres of influence: the capitalist camp and the socialist camp. Iran officially remained non-aligned but the Shah Mohammad Reza increasingly moved into the American orbit. The Iranian pro-Soviet Communist Party, the Tudeh Party, did not like Iran’s pro-American policy, and began an anti-American crusade, particularly among the young Iranians.⁸ The 1953 coup made the situation for Americans in Iran even worse. The coup certainly marked a new era in US-Iran relations. With the coup, the US and Iran entered into the second period in US-Iran relations. During this period, while the governments came increasingly closer to each other as allies and even signed a Treaty of Amity⁹, the Iranian people became much more anti-American. During the Cold War years, the younger, more radical, and the more nationalistic Iranians, both religious and secular, became increasingly anti-American. There were also the young socialists

⁵ Donald Ewalt, ‘The Fight for Oil: Britain in Persia, 1919’, *History Today*, Vol. 31, Issue 9, 1981, <http://www.historytoday.com/donald-ewalt/fight-oil-britain-persia-1919> (accessed 4 May 2014).

⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

⁷ Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929–1969*, New York: New York: W.W. Norton, 1973, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD_Issues/amdipl_6/stefan2.html (accessed 4 July 2014).

⁸ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two...*

⁹ *Pars Time n.d.*, Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights, http://www.parstimes.com/law/iran_us_treaty.html (accessed 2 June 2014).

who were struggling against the capitalist Iranians and Americans to supposedly help the Iranian working people. America for the first time also entered the Iranian political culture as an “imperialist” power bent on exploiting and dominating the country. After the coup, it was not just the Communists who were anti-American, but an absolute majority in the nation. That marked a major change in the US-Iran relationship: now the Government was pro-US while the people were anti-US.

The dominant view of the US after 1953 until the 1979 Islamic Revolution basically remained within the same framework, although an increasing number of Iranian upper and middle class elements went for education to the US and became pro-American. However, that group remained a minority during the second Pahlavi regime (1941–1979). Still, a majority of the Iranians were anti-American. Then, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 occurred, marking the beginning of the third period in US-Iran relations. During this period, the more practical pre-revolutionary hostility became increasingly transformed into an ideological animosity. Indeed, the idea of ‘west-toxication’ (Gharbzadeghi in Persian), which originated in the pre-revolutionary Iran, was perfected and practised after the Revolution. Now added to the original Tudeh anti-imperialist dogma against the US was the Islamic cultural anti-American dogma. The new revolutionaries accused the US of trying to corrupt Iranian culture and society on top of trying to exploit the country and destroy the Revolution. The Americans too became increasingly hostile and indeed obsessed with the Iranian Islamic Revolution, delusively trying to tame or destroy the new theocracy. Hence, there was a double problem here. While the secular Iranians saw America as an arrogant imperialist nation bent on weakening and dominating Iran, the more Islamic Iranians saw the arrogant power also as a decadent power against Iranian culture and the Islamic Revolution. Meanwhile, Americans developed a delusional and obsessional view of the Islamic Republic as an incurable anti-American rogue regime that needed to be tamed or overthrown.

The Revolution ushered in a spiral conflict between the US and Iran. In this spiral conflict, Iranians and Americans never trusted each other, and whatever Americans or Iranians did, the other side took as being directed against its national independence or interests. However, this situation was truer of the relations between the two governments than the two people. While a majority of Iranians were anti-American in the early years of the Revolution and through the Iran-Iraq war, they have increasingly become less so in recent years. Indeed, Iranians may be entering a fourth period in their view of the US. To be sure, they are very much divided in their opinion of America today as of any time before. In the pre-revolutionary time, a majority was anti-American, a minority pro-American and a few were suspended in the middle. Today, the pro and anti-Americans are in the minority while a large majority has developed a more nuanced position toward the US: They are neither for nor against the US and want to have good relations with it, but a relationship that is beneficial to both nations. Thus, most Iranians now want to develop a more realistic and balanced relationship with the US, one that is respectful and mutually beneficial, and that respects the territorial integrity and independence of both sides. Many among

the young Iranians do not just see things as black and white anymore and are seeking to discover the gray areas. They see issues that divide and unite the two nations and wish to focus on the unifying interests.

It needs to be added that the Iranian people have, as a whole, become more positive about the West. They do not think of the West or the US in terms of imperialism and the like categories as in the past, and have, generally, a positive view of the global community. They like Europeans, Canadians, Americans, and everybody else. The only two nations that many Iranians still seem to dislike to some extent are the Arabs and the Russians. Even towards these nations Iranians are developing realistic opinions. The West has become an attractive and exotic place for the contemporary Iranians. In recent years, they have even modeled their development, their democracy, their reform movements, and their laws after the West. Thus, they like the West and the US not so much because they like the American or European cultures or governments, but because these countries are the producers of modern civilizations, institutions and technologies. Iranians are impressed with America because of its technological achievements as opposed to its cultural advances. They respect this country for its modernizing impact on the contemporary world, but I do not think that one can call that feeling "pro-American".

Substantive issues and underlying causes

The West's unjust relations with Iran in the 150 years preceding the 1979 revolution was a key factor in Iranians' anti-West sentiment. Interventions of Britain and Russia in Iran beginning in the mid-19th century through the early 20th century are the saddest chapter of contemporary Iranian history. The gradual American entry into this vicious interventionist policy by the mid-20th century is the second sad chapter of that unfortunate history. In a strange manner, Britain and Russia, while rivals, cooperated in weakening and under-developing Iran.¹⁰ True, Iran and the US used to be two good friends before the Revolution, but they were only good friends at the level of the governments and not at the level of the people. Even during the Shah, Iranians were not very much interested in US-Iran relations because they felt that the relationship was not equitable and fair. It was not seen as based on a win-win relationship of mutual benefits. They also viewed the Shah's regime as illegitimate and as an imposition by the US on the Iranian people and the country through the 1953 coup. The American image in Iran had also suffered from the imperial interventions of Britain and Russia in previous decades. Assuming that a "strong" Iran was a "dangerous" Iran, these powers had crippled the country. While Americans did not share such view of Iran in those days, the bitter experience made it difficult for the Iranians to see America in a different light. Thus, there were some problems even before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Indeed, the 1979 revolution had basically three goals. First was to fight the dictatorship of the Shah and to establish democracy; second was to fight the

¹⁰ Amirahmadi, *The Political Economy...*

domination of America and to create an independent Iran; and third was to defeat the upper exploitative class towards establishing an equitable society. Freedom, independence and social justice were the three slogans of the Revolution, and together they were to produce a socially just, democratic and independent Iran within an Islamic form of government. Independence was directed towards the US domination, freedom towards the dictatorship of the Shah, and social justice towards the super-rich Iranians. The Shah, the super-rich and the US were inseparable from the Iranian viewpoint. That is how the Iranian Revolution became very much integrated into the idea of anti-Americanism that had preceded it. A turning point after the Revolution came when young Islamic radicals in Tehran took American diplomats and embassy employees hostage for 444 days. They used the Shah's entry into the US for medical treatment as a pretext. Subsequent developments simply reinforced the hostility and mistrust between the Islamic Republic and the US.¹¹

Only a few years into the Revolution, the US and Iran developed a laundry bag of grievances against each other, some real and some fictional. The coup, the Revolution, the hostage drama, the Iran-Iraq war and a few other factors led to a spiral conflict that continues to regenerate itself and that grows even when the two sides try to reduce tension. While this spiral conflict is based on real problems, it is also fed by misperception, misanalysis, and misunderstanding. The result is the mutual mistrust and demonization that prevails in their relations.¹² Complicating the situation was also a set of post-revolutionary developments that further increased their enmity, leading at times to even fatal practical responses on both sides. For example, Iranians would take Americans hostage, support groups who would terrorize Americans or their allies, and develop a clandestine nuclear program. Americans would support Saddam Hussein in the war against Iran, destroy the Iranian oil platforms and tankers in the Persian Gulf, and inadvertently shoot down an Iranian civilian airplane (in 1988); Americans would also impose sanctions on Iran and freeze Iranian assets in the US. The list goes on. The American claims against Iran regarding terrorism, nuclear proliferation, democracy deficit, and opposition to Middle East peace, and Iranian grievances that America is trying to weaken Iran and overthrow its regime are products of this unfortunate spiral conflict. So the current US-Iran struggle has a history behind it that does not make the life for either side easy to begin with.

The U.S.-Iran relationship has also suffered from third party interests. Indeed, the intersection of the American and Iranian interests is the crossroad of all types of other interests as well. These third parties include the Iranian opposition groups, Arabs, Israelis, Turks, Russians, the Chinese, and the Europeans. None of them really ever wanted the US and Iran to develop a healthy relationship because everyone in its own way benefits from the abnormal relations, or is afraid of a change in the

¹¹ David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

¹² Hooshang Amirahmadi and Shahir Shahidsaless, 'Avoid Repeating Mistakes toward Iran', *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2013, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 145, 162.

status quo. For example, even more so than the hostage crisis or even the coup of 1953, it was the Iraqi invasion of Iran and the 8-year war which followed that destroyed US-Iran relations. Most Iranians saw the war as America punishing Iran for taking Americans hostage in Tehran. The two governments have also mishandled the third parties in the relations. Neither side has had sufficient understanding of their interests or has come up with an appropriate idea to mitigate their concerns. The leaders on both sides have at best spoken their minds for the interest of their own nations but hardly have they accounted for the legitimate interests of the third parties. Instead, both the US and Iran have often used the third parties in the relationship tactically and opportunistically.

An imperative for a better relationship

Iran is a big country and it has the longest history in the region. Iran was the first empire builder in the world and has been a world leader for centuries. If the US is a leader in the West, Iran has had the Eastern leadership for centuries, representing the East in its struggle against the West – i.e. Greeks, Romans, British, and Americans. Iran is geographically vast, climatically varied, and culturally diverse, and it has a huge civilizational region – the Nowruz Land. Iran benefits from a vast national and regional infrastructure and has almost all types of natural resources including hydrocarbons, copper and precious stones. It has the second largest natural gas reserves and the fourth largest oil reserves in the world; it is also the second largest OPEC producer.

Iran is a country of over 75 million people, of whom 65 percent are below 40 years of age. They are a talented and educated population, of whom 15 million have a university degree. Iranians are also good consumers and most are eager consumers of Western goods and services. Iran offers tremendous investment opportunities in sectors as diverse as agriculture, oil, manufacturing, tourism, transportation and finance. Iran has a strategic geography in the most strategic world region: It is right in the middle of two seas, between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and borders 15 countries in land and water. It is an energy and political geography, sitting right at the center of the geopolitics of oil and conflict, a geography that makes it both a pivotal and an encore state. Iran lives in the neighborhood of the nuclear states, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Russia-Ukraine upheaval, rival superpowers, and emerging markets. Iran is obviously a major country and if the United States wants to stay a world power in the next 50 years, it cannot afford not to have Iran on its side.

America is currently losing significantly on the world stage. Firstly is a simple and sheer economic loss. The American economy looks increasingly likely to become superseded by the rapid growth of the Chinese within in a few years. Politically too, the US is under tremendous stress with problems in hot spots such as the Middle East and Ukraine. Already, many former allies of the US are turning to its rivals for support. This even includes Israel and Saudi Arabia. The only advantage that the US continues to hold, its military power, is also becoming increasingly irrelevant in an era of a decreasing effectiveness of offensive force. The American loss even includes

the prestige it used to have among many people around the world. Anti-Americanism is rampant even among friendly nations. Only a few nations still like Americans, and incidentally Iran is among those few – and this is despite the anti-American rhetoric of the Islamic Republic. And this is perhaps why Iran, with its strategic assets, can become a panacea to some American ills if the past partnership were to be revived.

The US was Iran's second largest trading partner after Germany. It had 15–20 billion dollars of trade with Iran during the Shah's reign. The US these days ranks nowhere in the category of major traders with Iran. Secondly, Iran is a country that has tremendous oil and gas reserves, but because of this long drawn out spiral conflict between the US and Iran, very little has been invested in Iran's petroleum sector; the investment opportunity is simply tremendous, with a potential of well over \$100 billion a year for at least 5 consecutive years. This business can also be captured by the US in no time if sanctions are lifted and relations improved. Iran can also help the US politically and in security terms. Iran can be of help in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and many more countries. Iran may even be pivotal to the security and wellbeing of Ukraine as it struggles with Russia over energy independence.

There are other long-term issues for the US as it continues animosity with Iran. For example, Americans used to live in Iran, and Iranians used to be welcomed into the US to take advantage of an American education and training. As a result, the Iranian political elite was increasingly American educated and its technocrats highly Americanized, thus constituting professionals who would support the US in Iran and beyond. That American strategic advantage within the Iranian political and technocratic administrations, as well as business community, has now mostly vanished thanks to US sanctions not just on the Iranian economy but on its education too. Today, there are few high-ranking Iranian politicians who are trained in the US, and if the trend continues, there would be even fewer in the future. The same holds for the Iranian technocrats, educators, scientists and business executives. Many of them are now educated in London, Australia, Europe, Canada, and Russia. Even high-placed business executives on both sides are now strangers to each other. This structural shift in Iran's political and technocratic elite allegiance will harm the US interests the most even years after the US mends relationships with Iran. It will take years for the US to produce the kind of pro-American elite that it had in the country under the Shah. Yet, there is a quick remedy: thousands of Iranians live in the US, and if relations were to improve, some of them would return to the homeland and give America a helping hand there. But, this population is aging and for it to be of use, the relations have to improve urgently.

Americans understand Iran's significance, though not always, and are well aware of the imperative for better relations. American political elite never forgave themselves for "losing" Iran in 1979, and they want to regain it.¹³ They want to get Iran back on

¹³ Hooshang Amirahmadi, 'U.S.-Iran Relations: Perils and Promises', *peyvand.com* (English and Persian), 2006, <http://www.payvand.com/news/06/sep/1254.html> (accessed 3 June 2014).

their side because the US understands well that Iran on the side of its rivals, particularly those in Iran's region, could be very dangerous to American national interests. We now have a situation where Russia and China are emerging stronger and more assertive by the day. The US, which thought it had won the Cold War may, as it transpires, lose it again. It might have won the Cold War against the Soviet Union but a whole new Cold War is seemingly developing for the US against Russia and perhaps China. Thus, the US cannot afford not to have Iran on its side; indeed, the wellbeing of Americans in the long-term may depend on their relationship with Iran. This is one of the primary reasons why Americans are not ignoring Iran. If Iran was not important, it would have been simply forgotten. However, Iran is not a country to be ignored. Yet, it is not enough for the US to desire a return of Iran or keep Iran in mind; it must win Iran's heart and to do so the US must reform its mind in a new partnership direction. The good news for the US is that it can make Iran into a friend, or at the least, a partner if it listens to the voice of reason and acts according to its best interests. As we shall see, procedural matters and political will are tougher enemies of US-Iran relations than are historical and current grievances or third party backstabbing of the relationship. The US must reassess its procedural approach to Iran as it formulates a new paradigm of US-Iran relations focused on a genuine appreciation of Iran's "revolutionary ideals" and practical concerns.

Iran also understands the significance of the US for its wellbeing. The nation has lost trillions of dollars in actual economic and opportunity cost since the revolution in 1979 when relations with the US became inimical. There is not a single country in the world that has developed economically on a sustained basis and become democratic in the absence of diplomatic ties with the US. This does not mean that if Iran establishes a diplomatic relationship with the US, it will automatically become democratic and developed, as the examples of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, among others, indicate. The thesis simply suggests that the relationship with the US is a necessary condition, though it is not a sufficient condition for development and democracy. It is a necessary condition because of two reasons. First, in the absence of a relationship, the US does not allow that country to become democratic and developed because America sees itself the symbol of democracy and development, and thus there cannot be a second symbol of democracy and development that is anti-America. The emergence of that second symbol will contradict the American philosophy and purpose.

The second reason relates to the other side, that is, the country that stands against the US. It uses anti-Americanism to destroy democratic movements and to control the elite circulation in its favor, thus creating an inefficient and corrupt management system. The result is economic stagnation if not underdevelopment as well as political repression. The Iranian experience in its enmity with the US vividly demonstrates the validity of this thesis. Therefore, as long as the US and Iran do not have a relationship, Iran will never become a democratic nation and will have difficulty in developing economically. Unfortunately, this recognition by Iran will not be enough to change minds in Tehran, which remains more concerned about its theocratic system, *Nizam*, than democracy or development. But here too, there is good news:

the population is increasingly demanding political reform and economic prosperity, and the Islamic system, under pressure, will have to modify its revolutionary principles toward more pragmatic ideas and policies to survive. This latter trend is already underway though the revolutionaries and hard-core Principals are still fiercely resisting it.

Procedural considerations for the way forward

Informative and communicative discourse is always the key to meaningful diplomacy and it can assume a variety of forms such as diplomatic, academic, policy, business, and professional exchanges. Dialogue is important too, but it has to be based on reality, honesty and respect. A real dialogue is also based on a deeper analysis, understanding, realism and pragmatism. It must also be balanced and communicative. The problem between the US and Iran is not just that they don't have diplomatic relations or that they are not friends or partners. What exists between them is "abnormal" as they have had difficulty in maintaining even an effective level of sustained and healthy discourse and dialogue between them. The US and Iran have engaged a few times, as in the case of nuclear negotiations, relations with Iraq and Afghanistan, but they have not been able to sustain their engagement or to promote it to an effective level. Indeed, the lack of sustained communication remains a disturbing issue in US-Iran relations. Even nations at war maintain formal diplomatic ties, and revolutionary nations have also been able to maintain diplomatic ties with the US. During the Cold War, the biggest American embassy was in Moscow; and the biggest USSR embassy was in Washington, DC. While a sustained and comprehensive constructive engagement over their broader relationship is an imperative for the two sides, and have been so for many years, Washington and Tehran continue to play a game of unhealthy negotiations that aim, despite their win-win rhetoric, to make the other side lose. The fact that this time-tested game is hugely costly has escaped their attention as they have focused on harming each other rather than solving their mutual problems. Talks toward better relations do have some cost, as both sides must make concessions. Yet, any compromise for mitigating the tension and normalizing the animosity is less costly than the status quo. Thus, the leaders on both sides have to compare the cost of compromise to the cost of abnormal animosity, and if they do, the choice for dialogue towards normalization will surely emerge as preferable.

So, why then do the US and Iran follow a win-lose game, fail to engage in an honest dialogue, and maintain a "normal animosity" in the form of a "no war no peace" status quo? I think the problem is with the very nature of the Islamic Revolution and its offspring, the theocratic state system. This theocratic revolution is radically anti-American and the US has also hardly lived with radical revolutions. While the revolution was tamable and could be deformed as other revolutions have been, the Islamic system and its ideals are carved in stone. This obstacle notwithstanding, the two sides must find a way to engage in a sustained and comprehensive manner as otherwise they will both face a tragic future in their relationship. The question is:

how they might bypass the formidable obstacle of a theocratic state system. One easy answer is "regime change". But that has been tried and failed. The other answer is to reform the theocracy toward a more hospitable attitude towards the US. That has also been tried and failed. A third answer is to change the American imperial system into a thing more hospitable to the Islamic theocracy, a demand Tehran has repeatedly made. That will also remain a pipe dream of the Islamic system in Iran, not only because the US will not change but also because that theocracy has other formidable enemies, most notably Israel.

Only one road remains: to mend relations while the two sides stay who they are but accept to withdraw from ideas and acts that are harmful to the other side. Such an arrangement will entail refraining from intervention in domestic affairs, as well as containing regional behavior at the red lines, of the other side. Arriving at and maintaining such an arrangement is most difficult if not impossible in the current US-Iran and regional environments where mutual misunderstanding, distrust and wrong negotiation procedures prevail. The approach will also be very unpopular with the Iranian reformers and the opposition to the Islamic regime who has focused on democracy and human rights. Secular and democratic states around the world, and in the region too, will also want the theocracy nullified from the Iranian state system as they fear that a theocratic state in Iran will be a further impetus for theocratic movements like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. While these concerns are legitimate, they must be put aside for the time being if an improvement in US-Iran relations is desirable. Instead of working against a US-Iran rapprochement on the proposed terms, the opposition must hold its hope for a day when normal US-Iran relations would create potentials for secular and democratic development in Iran. Notwithstanding such concerns and potential for future change, it is also today's imperative that the two sides try their best and give this suggested approach a chance even if they may not believe in its ultimate success. The fact is, there is no better solution as the past three decades of struggle over the relations vividly demonstrate.

To help realize the potential fruits of this approach, here are a few tips. Firstly, the US and Iran must develop the political will for a normal relationship even if they want to stay inimical. That is, they must accept to normalize their animosity to begin with. In thinking towards this direction, they must recall that the two governments have a civilizational duty to normalize their relationship and maintain a healthy diplomatic dialogue. Diplomacy and diplomatic ties are the most significant achievements of the human race. They were invented after centuries when nations across the globe murdered each other in wars and pillaged each other of their belongings. Indeed, normal international relations are an inalienable human right, as peace is the most significant condition of human existence, and the two governments must not stand in the way of such a normal relationship. Developing the political will is incumbent upon the governments particularly because a solid infrastructure for better relations already exists. For example, many public opinion polls have shown that the people on both sides prefer diplomacy and engagement to coercive means and hostility. Indeed, while the two governments remain inimical, the two peoples

are increasingly hospitable toward each other. Additionally, there are trade, investment, cultural, scientific and geopolitical opportunities for cooperation, and the two governments have a responsibility to see such potentials flourish.

Secondly, the American and Iranian governments need to be realistic about their domestic situations and develop a realistic view of each other. There are a lot of myths on both sides about what the other side looks like. The Islamic regime views the US as an arrogant state of an imperialistic nature. It also views the US as a force bent on changing Tehran's regime and maintaining its underdevelopment condition if not destroying it. The US also sees Iran in a negative light. It sees the Iranian Islamic regime as illegitimate with no popular appeal, and believes that Iranians hate this regime and want to overthrow it at the first opportunity. The US also often views Iranians as miserable under this Islamic regime, as people with a poor quality of life, who are thus waiting for US troops to arrive in Iran to save them. All these beliefs are more or less unrealistic. So, it is very critical that both sides develop a realistic perspective of each other in terms of what they actually are. They have to start with reality and move away from myths and propaganda. They really have to understand each other as they are and be respectful of that reality. The US and Iran have to also realize that in their particular engagement game there cannot be pre-conditions except for mutual respect and fair play. They should be respectful towards each other even as they hold opposing principles or value systems. They must talk to each other respectfully using a tone and language that are appropriate to their level of civilization. Iran is a historic and respectful nation with a great civilization. The US is too a respectful and civilized nation. The new world owes it to the US for the wealth of modern science and technologies that it enjoys, as the old world was so dependent on what Iran had to offer. Their mutual appreciation must extend beyond their mutual concerns for security and national interests. They should start viewing each other in positive and real terms even if they see negative aspects and have a different ideal partner in mind. Such an approach should help them focus on principles and issues that bond them rather than those that divide them. This will also help them become real about their engagement and take workable initiatives.

Thirdly, both sides must recognize that much of what goes between them are not just issues in US-Iran relations. Terrorism is a global and regional issue today as is nuclear proliferation. Human rights are also a global and regional issue as is the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. These are also interconnected issues, influencing each other in the form of a chain reaction. Thus, the two governments must realize and accept that these issues are as much global and regional as they are bilateral and interrelated, and for that reason, their ultimate solution also lies beyond US-Iran relations and a single-issue focus. More significantly, their solution requires bilateral and multilateral cooperation among the key stakeholders. That is, no one should be left out in any attempt at resolving the issues. They also have to understand and accept the fact that this relationship has other stakeholders who need not lose from improved US-Iran relations. So, it is critical for both the US and Iran to bring others into their dialogue and speak to them and convince them that they don't need

to be worried about a US-Iran rapprochement. This complexity of issues also requires that they develop a deep appreciation for each other's needs and concerns. The US is a superpower that has particular needs and concerns, as Iran is a regional power with its specific needs and concerns. The American assumption that a strong Iran is a dangerous Iran must change in favor of its exact opposite. Iran must too change its view that its regime will be safer without the US in the region. The facts on the ground prove the exact opposite scenario.

Fourthly, Iran and the US have put so much into their baggage of claims, accusations and demonization that no piecemeal, small incremental measures will ever clean them. This is particularly the case because there are other stakeholders involved. As past experience suggests, any time they have resorted to incrementalism measures to resolve disputes, someone out there has invariably added a problem to the baggage, thus damaging relations further. So, to break through the dead lock, US-Iran relations really need a big push and a grand deal.¹⁴ US-Iran relations will never be resolved in an incremental way. The US and Iran cannot follow the US-China 'ping-pong' diplomacy model of engagement. Rather, they need to adopt a 'big bang' approach. One day, sooner or later, they would need to say to each other, "Listen, it was all a mistake, we are brothers, and let's get over it!" I believe this is how one day the US and Iran will begin the way forward – engaging in a dialogue that is simple, straight and courageous. As things stand, Iran is more ready than the US for a 'big push' approach if the US could get over its ideal notion of eliminating the theocracy. The Iranian mindset, on the contrary, is one of a big push, big bang nature; they don't have the stomach for smaller steps and micro talks unless forced into them. They prefer macro talks and big steps to incrementalism. Unfortunately, the American foreign policy often prefers an incremental, slow, and piece-meal approach. The US must reconsider its foreign policy approach to Iran.

Fifthly, they also have to realize that there is absolutely not one single issue in US-Iran relations that cannot be negotiated, with the exception of the theocracy, which will have a solution lying outside the realm of US-Iran relations. Every issue in the relationship is negotiable. So, the problem is not with the issues that stand between them but the lack of political will and procedural deficiencies. Henceforth, both the US and Iran would need to develop that will to engage and find the starting point together. Unfortunately, we have a series of problems here, the most critical of which is a procedural problem. Neither side wants to be viewed as the initiator of a dialogue nor do they want to be viewed as "giving in" to the other side. Both sides want to be on the top, neither one prepared to undertake a role perceived as submissive. Yet, in an equitable dialogue, these issues matter the least, as the ultimate outcome will be all-encompassing and matter the most. This procedural problem is also at the heart of the "pre-conditioning issue" in US-Iran engagement. For example, the

¹⁴ Hooshang Amirahmadi, 'The AIC Whitepaper', *The American Iranian Council (AIC)*, 2009, <http://www.american-iranian.org/policy-papers> (accessed 4 July 2014).

following notions seem to be prevalent between them: "If you stop doing this, then I will talk to you," or "the ball is in your court now."

The US and Iran should start thinking seriously about the fact that it does not matter who really initiates the process and from what position on the top or in the bottom. The two sides have to start thinking seriously about the banality of procedure, as what ultimately matters is the substance, not just the form in the relationship. They also have to understand that this conflict is a spiral one, a conflict that fuels itself unless its reproductive cycle is broken. Thus, one side must always be ready to voluntarily jump into the cycle and help break it. The US-Iran engagement is of huge significance and the stakes are very high; so it should not really matter who jumps first into the vicious cycle or makes the first compromise. If the US and Iran can settle the "who first" issue between them, they will defeat the apparent evil of procedure and both sides can emerge as successful in a 'win-win' situation.

The role catalysts can play

The governments of the US and Iran are ultimately responsible for the problems between them and for their resolution. They cannot escape this responsibility and must be made accountable for any damaging consequences that have resulted from the spiralling conflict of the last three decades. However, beyond the two governments, a host of states, institutions and individuals have been significant both negatively and positively in terms of affecting this spiralling relationship. Whilst enemies of a reconciliation will continue to prevent a sustained and constructive dialogue towards better relations, the time has come for friends to double their efforts by organizing and uniting, raising meaningful funds, building a large and strong constituency, and engaging in effective, catalytic and lobbying activities. The people on both sides, mediators and messengers, peace and human rights activists, academics, intellectuals, journalists, companies and business executives, think tanks, NGOs, diplomats and policy experts all have a responsibility to improve understanding and encourage constructive dialogue between the two countries. Above all, the public has to become mobilized, engaged, proactive, demanding, and innovative in this relationship. This matter should not just be left to the governments. The people must speak up and tell their governments that they have no right to stand in the way of a better relationship. They must indeed rebel against the status quo and force the governments into an honest engagement for better relations. However, for the people to become proactive in forging better relations, they must be informed and educated about the dangers of the status quo and a further worsening of relations. Here is where the voice of academics, intellectuals, professionals and journalists become critical.

Intellectuals have a particularly significant role to play. Unfortunately, on both sides the intellectual community has not always played a constructive role. For example, until recently most Iranian intellectuals were against better US-Iran relations and many even spoke words or took actions that were most detrimental to any engagement. Iran has many politicized intellectuals (who are often radical and ideological), but only a few politicians of intellectual capability (who think realistically

and pragmatically.) On the US side, political intellectuals are divided as well. There are those who are fervently pro-American, pro-Israeli or pro-Arab, and a wide range of like-minded groups. Many pro-American intellectuals are indeed very much in favor of a healthy US-Iran relationship and they have seriously researched for potential solutions, whereas other types have advocated sanctions, isolationism or even war. Academics who could potentially become another significant contributory group in relation building, have on both sides been voiceless for the most part. Political academics have seemingly been preparing papers, ultimately bound to take up shelf space in their respective institutions, with the exception of a few who have supported the policymakers advocating sanctions and wars. It is of little wonder then that academics have become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to active public policy. This field has increasingly been taken over by non-academic think tanks, lobbyist organizations and the media, which often produce superficial analyses and recommend interest-driven policies. The academics are, generally speaking, either non-influential in the public policy arena or they are apparently on the "wrong side."

Mediators can also play a constructive role in US-Iran relations, although this channel has often been neglected or deemed open to mistrust. Yet, in the absence of direct diplomatic contacts and communication on important issues in the relations, the two sides have for a long time depended on messengers and mediators, some helpful but with others apparently harmful. While the characteristics or interests of mediators have been a key factor in terms of their specific impact, and a well-educated and honest mediator can certainly be deemed helpful, a more critical issue has been the fact that both the US and Iran lack mediation cultures and thus there is no true opportunities in terms of roles for mediators. However, there is always a potential for middlemen to act as catalysts. The mediation problem on the Iranian side is due to the fact that conflict resolution, as a science or profession, has yet to develop there; indeed, hardly any academic conflict resolution programs exist in Iranian universities. Conversely, the fields of academic and professional conflict resolution, as well as mediation, are highly developed in the US; however, Americans remain averse to intrusive mediators and often seem more comfortable with the notion of mediation playing a role on the margins. It is no wonder that the US is not so hospitable toward the UN as it always likes to be in charge. Therefore, in US-Iran relations, while mediation can play an important role, the function is better and more effectively performed if the mediators stand on the margins rather than adopting a stance in the middle. Ultimately, the US-Iran conflict would have to be resolved by the two governments but they should get help from the third parties when necessary. However, to be effective, the mediators must not act like attorneys; rather they must stay on the margins letting the two governments engage directly.

Finally, for the well-wishing catalysts to effectively impact the relations, they must have the right organizations and adequate funding. As in all related cases, organizers and funders must closely cooperate. There have to be people who invest capital in terms of hard cash and those who will contribute capital in terms of hard graft, and their commitment must be long-term and consistent. Luckily, the experience

of the American Iranian Council¹⁵ demonstrates that while money is critical, persistency in and consistency of the mission are more important. While enemies of reconciliation have spent billions of dollars in pushing for military conflict, the AIC with only thousands of dollars has been able to accomplish miracles in the relationship such as preventing war and promoting dialogue. It has been even able to provide breakthrough opportunities that were unfortunately “missed,” as acknowledged by Iran’s former President Mohammad Khatami. One example is the historic speech and offer of a “global settlement” of issues by Secretary Madeline Albright in March 2000 at an AIC conference. Luminaries like Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary John Kerry, Secretary Chuck Hagel, the late Secretary Cyrus Vance, and Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Mehdi Karubi have all spoken at the AIC events, offering significant proposals for the way forward. While, money is not everything for an effective catalytic role, it is nevertheless an important factor. With more funding more can be done more effectively. There are of course a variety of sources from which the funding might be secured but in the particular case of US-Iran relations, the wealthy Iranians must be singled out as the most appropriate source. Yet unfortunately, this group has been the least interested in funding activities related to US-Iran peace. On the contrary, some have even funded the groups who have been promoting “targeted” sanctions, and even military attacks. Clearly, this unhealthy culture must change and they must pay for peace. Let us hope that they will.

¹⁵ www.american-iranian.org.