

Case Study: Iran and the United States

Few nations have relationships as troubled as Iran and the US.

Today, whether it comes to international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, fossil fuels, the United Nations or the Middle East Peace Process, there are few global issues where the strained relation between the US and Iran are not clearly felt. As a result, there are few instances where cultural diplomacy is more desperately needed.

In this regard, it has become absolutely vital to arrive at a clear understanding of the relations between these two nations. What follows is a case study of precisely that. The study will begin with a brief summary of the past and present relations of Iran and the US including attempts to reach a dialogue. The case study will then conclude with an analysis of the situation and some suggestions for future endeavors

Introduction to Iranian and US Relations

The US and Iran severed official diplomatic relations following the turmoil of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and currently have no official relations. However, it was not always so. Ambassador exchanges began in the mid-1800s and during the Second World War ties were cemented as Iran collaborated with the Allies allowing the transportation of war material through Iran to the beleaguered Russians in the Caucasus region.

As the Cold War Developed, US Iranian ties depended; the US sought further Iranian cooperation in containing communism in Asia while on Iran received military and economic support and enjoyed Western technological assistance in exploiting its oil wealth. At this time, cultural, military, economic and political relations ran deep. Yet, it was precisely in this context that US-Iranian relations grew then ultimately withered.

The Iranian perspective.

Iran could be considered a fiercely anti-American nation. Antagonism to the US occupies a central role in the daily political, and in many cases, the social fabric of Iran. This animosity has its sources in previous decades and revolves around two main themes; opposition to US intrusion into domestic Iranian affairs and what Iran considers to be US aggression.¹

The CIA/UK orchestrated coup that removed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953 is one example of US interference in Iranian affairs. Additionally, Iran accuses the US of fostering rebellion in Iran through funding and support of anti-government groups in Iran. The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Kurdish) and the Jundallah (Balochi) are two militant nationalist movements that Iran has long charged the United

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran_%E2%80%93_United_States_relations#cite_note-70, retrieved April 29, 2010

States with funding.² In addition, Iran charges that the US has played a role in the demonstrations against the 2010 Presidential elections in Iran

Military aggression is another issue that lies at the top of Iran's list of grievances. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) most of the world's nations supported moderate Iraq against radical Iran. Yet Iran resents the US support of Iran's enemy during this war in particular. Specifically, Iran continues to carry a grudge over the US supplying Iraq with the chemical weapons it used during the war.³

Adding fuel to the fire, in July of 1988, US guided missile Cruiser the *USS Vincennes* on station in the Persian Gulf mistakenly shot down Iranian Airlines flight 655 killing 290. The US maintains the downing was a case of mistaken identity with the Iranians considering it a deliberate act of war and another example of US aggression.

A final major sticking point is the economic sanctions that the US has placed on Iran. Starting under the Carter administration, the US has steadily increased its sanctions regime in place. These sanctions prohibit the transfer of much-needed military and petroleum technology as well as prohibiting US companies and individuals from investing in or doing business with Iranian nationals and companies.⁴

In short, in Iranian political thought, anti-American sentiments run deep. The list of grievances is long; foreign intervention, coups, military aggression, support of Iraq and not to mention a perceived political disrespect for the Iran itself and accusations of American attempts of global hegemony. Recently a senior Iranian diplomat summed up the Iranian view,

"Our biggest problem with the U.S. is its arrogance. The United States thinks itself the commander in chief of the entire world and thinks it has the right to dictate to everyone what to do and how to act. That's arrogant and disrespectful. We reject this."

These are the major issues that lie at the center of Iranian and US relations.⁵

The American Perspective

Despite the cooperation of the 40s, 50s and 60s, it was the overthrow of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the subsequent 444-day hostage crisis which severed American and Iranian relations. However, according to the United States, tensions with Iran are perpetuated by Iran's current conduct rather than events that occurred 30 years ago. Today it's Iran's nuclear program and support for international terrorism, which the US considers to be one of the major the obstacles to the resumption of US-Iran relations.⁶

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8537567.stm>, retrieved April, 28, 2010.

³ http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/arming_iraq.php, retrieved April 21, 2010

⁴ <http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/programs/iran/iran.pdf>, retrieved February 27, 2010

⁵ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123861706862379499.html>, retrieved March 29, 2010

⁶ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>, retrieved April 21, 2010

Currently, Iran's nuclear program might be the single greatest impediment to the resumption of US-Iranian relations. According to the US, Iran has been developing a clandestine nuclear weapons program under the guise of an effort to acquire atomic energy. Iran contends that their program is peaceful. Nevertheless, the US cites a series of inconsistencies and failure to meet AEIA requirements. This case is currently being played out.

Iran's alleged support for international terrorism is another major point of contention. According to the US Department of State, the government of Iran is a Designated State Sponsor of Terrorism. This means that Iran provides support for groups who target civilians for political goals.⁷ For the most part, this support amounts to the arming, funding, training, or providing sanctuary to those groups. The United States alleges that Iran supports terrorism primarily through its proxies, two well-known ones being Hezbollah and Hamas. Inside Iran there is the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) which the US also is considering labeling a terrorist organization do to its provision of terrorist training and support to groups active in areas such as Georgia, Chechnya, the Balkans and the wider Middle East.⁸

Furthermore, the United States charges Iran with supporting groups that have committed terrorist attacks upon the US specifically. Two such cases are; the April 1983, bombing of a US Embassy in Beirut with a loss of over 60 lives and the October 1983, suicide bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut with a loss of 299 lives. The US believes Iran to be responsible for planning and coordination these attacks and civil cases have been brought against Iran.⁹ In American eyes, Iran's support for international terrorism, its nuclear weapons program and its vitriolic anti-Western policy creates a 'perfect storm' which the US simply cannot ignore.

Iran-US Relations: Missed Opportunities

As the open military clashes of the 1980s subsided each side entrenched themselves and a type of Cold War developed. As a result, Iranian and American relations are difficult to outline as they did not follow a linear path. Often disagreements ran parallel to breakthroughs. Additionally, on both sides, regular changes in Presidents and global issues have left both nations with a somewhat incoherent strategy to each other. However, as the Twentieth Century closed each nation seemed to be sending out feelers in order to gauge the chances of a re-establishment of relations on their own terms.

Khatami, Clinton and Bush

The 1990s saw a slight thawing of relations between the two nations. This was possible largely in part due to the election of Mohamed Khatami in 1996. Viewed by many as a

⁷ Raphael F. Perl, "Terrorism, the Future and US Foreign Policy". Issue Brief: 95112, Congressional Research Service, Washington D.C. (December 9, 1996). Retrieved, April 13, 2010

⁸ <http://www.savekosovo.org/default.asp?p=4&leader=0&sp=137>, retrieved April 28, 2010

⁹ <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1310&dat=19831024&id=yGOVAAAIBAJ&sjid=TukDAAAIBAJ&pg=6694,6471412>, retrieved April 5, 2010

moderate reformer, Khatami made peace overtures to the United States.¹⁰ For example, in an interview with CNN's Christianne Amanpour, Khatami proposed cultural exchanges between the US and Iran hoping to the 'crack the wall of mistrust'.¹¹ The United States accepted this offer and the two nations began hosting athletic-based cultural exchanges beginning in 1996.¹²

Around the same time, the US also lifted some of the sanctions on Iran and US Secretary of State Madeline Albright invited Iranian diplomats to 'draw up a road map to normalized relations'. As the cultural exchanges continued, Albright publicly described the US's role in the 1953 coup as 'regrettable'.¹³ In 2005, Khatami ran for election but lost to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Amadinejad and Bush

Anyone familiar with the Presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and George W. Bush will not be surprised to learn that US-Iranian relations did not improve markedly during their terms in office.

Perhaps the first indication of this trend was Bush's now infamous Axis of Evil speech that he gave in 2002 while Khatami was still President of Iran. During this speech Bush directly identified Iran, due to its support of terrorism and nuclear ambitions, as being a clear threat to international security, labeling them a member of an 'axis of evil'.¹⁴ Many analysts suggest this speech dealt a death-blow to the nascent reform movement in Iran.¹⁵

As strange as it might seem, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq actually brought the US and Iran closer. On some level, it has obligated the US to recognize (perhaps tacitly) that Iran is a regional power and ultimate success in Iraq or Afghanistan will only be achieved with Iranian cooperation.¹⁶ In April of 2003, at the outset of the war with Iraq, Iran approached the United States with what is now known as the "Grand Bargain".¹⁷ This offer was officially presented through the Swiss Embassy in Tehran which represents US interests in Iran. Iran sought; a lifting of the crippling US sanctions, diplomatic recognition of Iran, discontinuation of the US funding of domestic Iranian opposition groups and an end to the US policy of regime change in Iran.¹⁸ In return, Iran offered to accept a two-state solution regarding Israel and Palestine, to reduce the funding of what the US considered terrorist organizations, pledged cooperation with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan and finally offered to enter into a Persian Gulf security

¹⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1373476.stm, retrieved April 12, 2010

¹¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>

¹² <http://www.farsinet.com/news/sports.html#wrestling>, retrieved April 4, 2010

¹³ http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0004/19/i_ins.00.html, retrieved April 26, 2010

¹⁴ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/>, retrieved April, 26, 2010

¹⁵ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45/286.html>, April 12, 2010

¹⁶ <http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cdmctrch/20090605-eng.pdf>, retrieved March 19, 2010

¹⁷ <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0525-05.htm>, retrieved March 20, 2010

¹⁸ <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0525-05.htm>, retrieved March 20, 2010

agreement which, in theory, would have voluntarily brought an end to Iran's nuclear program.

The diplomats involved met and the US believed the offer to be sincere. They then passed a report on to Colin Powell, then Secretary of State, who agreed the offer was significant but rejected it as "a non-starter". The Hawks in the Whitehouse ignored the offer as they felt it made no real concessions on the issues the US deemed significant.¹⁹

It is therefore surprising that in May of 2006, Iranian president Amadinejad again sent a letter to US President George W. Bush suggesting a meeting where both could discuss Iran's nuclear program.²⁰ In September of the same year, Ahmadinejad challenged Bush to a debate at the United Nations. Both offers were considered publicity stunts and as they, again, made no clear concessions on the necessary issues, were rejected by the US. White house representative quipped, "No, there will be no steel-cage grudge match between Bush and Ahmadinejad."²¹ At the end of the Bush administration relations remained hostile.

Present

To many people the 2008 election of Barak Obama to the United States Presidency signaled a shift in American foreign policy. While this remains to be seen Obama has undoubtedly changed the tone. Obama declared meeting and negotiating with Iran as one of his campaign platforms.²²

More recently Obama has poetically verbalized the obstinate American position of in his first interview as US President symbolically given to Middle Eastern News Agency stating, ""If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us."²³ In short, from the American perspective, the names might have changed but the game has not.

Regardless of Ahmadinejad's congratulatory message to Obama upon his election, the Iranian position also remains unchanged.²⁴ Another senior Iranian diplomat answered a question about potential negotiations between the US and Iran,

"Our idea of negotiation is mutual respect. They should know by now that they can't impose their will on Iran. If they don't change their attitude then negotiations are meaningless. If America wasn't arrogant, they would send an answer to Mr. Ahamdinejad's congratulatory letter to President Obama. Manners dictate that when someone says hello you answer them back." ²⁵

¹⁹ http://www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=mohammad_javad_zarif, April 25, 2010

²⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4983868.stm, retrieved April 19, 2010

²¹ Vick, Karl. "No Proposals in Iranian's Letter to Bush, U.S. Says." The Washington Post. Retrieved 29-10-2006. "No 'steel-cage, grudge match' between Bush, Ahmadinejad." CNN. Retrieved 10-01-2007.

²² <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE50Q23220090127>, retrieved April 9, 2010

²³ http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503543_162-4759248-503543.html retrieved, may 3, 2010

²⁴ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/06/letter-ahmadinejad-congratulates-obama/>, retrieved April 2, 2010.

²⁵ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123861706862379499.html>, retrieved April 22, 2010

From their perspective, Obama's election has not brought any apparent changes in policy or behavior as well.

Analysis

In light of the long past and repeated, albeit half-hearted, attempts to establish a dialogue one must ask why these two nations have remained so hostile. The answer lies less in the past as one might think. In the case of Iran it is a matter of path dependency and ambiguity. For the US it's a matter of not backing down and surrendering a powerful position. In both cases, a lack of trust is a central theme.

In Iran, anti-Americanism has become such an integral part of policy that changing course is nearly impossible. The Islamic Republic was founded upon a perception of American aggression and perpetuating that perception of aggression is key to the regime's legitimacy. As long as tensions between with the US remain, the Islamic Regime has legitimacy and power. As Robert Litwak has observed,

"Hostility to the US has been a central plank of the revolutionary platform and sometimes appears to be the Revolution's only platform. Deprived of this, radicals would have to devise another enemy, another excuse, or possibly even a program...Normalization implies that Iran would be a country like any other, losing its Revolutionary mission. The more pragmatic Iran becomes, the less ideology will exercise a hold on its citizens. The clerical regime would then lose its power and control over the country."³³³

Further, the internal mechanisms of the Iranian government means that foreign policy goals are always subordinate to domestic political wrangling. The underlying problem, says Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations, is,

"There's been a breakdown in the country's foreign policy machinery. Iran doesn't have a foreign policy right now. It has domestic politics, and its foreign policies are just a sporadic expression of that. It's not sinister; it's not duplicitous; it's just incompetent."²⁶

In this regard, not knowing who is calling the shots and when makes diplomatic relations elusive leaving America unable to engage Iran with effective diplomacy.

Furthermore, in terms of international relations, Iran's position and demands can be described as ambiguous. For example, Iran has, on many occasions, provided list of grievances requiring apologies such as the 1953 coup, the *Vincennes* incident and the Iran Iraq War. However, as mentioned, the US has on occasion already publicly apologized, expressed regret or provided compensation for such incidents. For example, in 1996 a 61.8 million dollar settlement was reached under the International Court of

²⁶ <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/nov/01/opinion/oe-mcmanus1>, retrieved April 3, 2010

Justice regarding the Iran Air tragedy yet Iran still demands an apology and reparations.²⁷

Making matters more complicated, the Iranian government often objects to matters that have little bearing on international relations. For example, in the Hollywood film *The Wrestler* an actor portraying a professional wrestler destroys an Iranian flag during a show. The Iranian government has objected to this calling it 'psychological warfare', a somewhat odd accusation considering the government sponsored anti-American propaganda that permeates much of Iranian society.²⁸ This idiosyncratic approach to foreign policy seems to be a legitimate, perhaps contrived, obstacle to an effective dialogue between the two nations.

On the other hand, the United States seems to be asking a great deal from Iran with very few guarantees. The disagreement over Iran's nuclear program is an excellent example of this dynamic. The Islamic Regime has sensibly framed the nuclear issue as a national issue, in short, linking a nuclear program to national sovereignty. If the US is expecting Iran to surrender its nuclear program, it might be waiting a long time. Should Iran surrender its nuclear program, what guarantees do they have that such a move will be reciprocated? To solve this dilemma the US should, and is, seek sanctions in the United Nations. This would have the twofold effect of increasing the pressure on Iran as well as providing a mechanism for removing those sanctions once Iran has complied.

A Case for Cultural Diplomacy

In light of these dilemmas, one could suggest cultural diplomacy as an excellent tool in reestablishing relations. Cultural Diplomacy revolves around the themes of dialogue, understanding and trust, all lacking elements in Iran-US relations.²⁹ However, between the citizens of each nation, feelings are far less belligerent. Recent polls show that 50% of Americans support establishing a dialogue with Iran while slightly more Iranians, 61%, support negotiations without preconditions. A further 73% of Americans supports the use of diplomacy to solve issues with Iran.³⁰ Therefore, one must ask, "What are the real stumbling blocks to renewed relations?" At the Governmental level, renowned US-Iranian relations expert Dr. Houshang Amirahmadi summarizes it this way, "The gravest problem between Iran and the West is this issue of distrust between the two sides."³¹

It would appear then that the political leaders and diplomats have too far entrenched themselves in their respective positions to allow for the flexibility required. Athletes, artists and students do not have these limitations and would represent the ideal cultural ambassadors.

²⁷<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19960223&id=wBoiAAAAIbAJ&sjid=lqYFAAAAiBAJ&pg=2821,3342625>, retrieved April 2, 2010

²⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3740936/Hollywood-film-The-Wrestler-insults-Iran.html>, retrieved, May 19, 2010

²⁹ http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_abouticd, retrieved March 12, 2010

³⁰ <http://www.angus-reid.com/issue/C18/>, retrieved April 15, 2010

³¹ <http://www.gozaar.org/template1.php?id=1276&language=english>

In this regard, the cultural exchanges initiated under the Clinton/Khatami administrations have borne fruit. Take the case of Hamed Ehadadi as an example. Ehadadi is an Iranian basketball player who visited the US on a State Department sponsored athletic exchange. While there he was noticed by National Basketball Association talent scouts who offered him a position on the Memphis Grizzlies Basketball team.³² Doing so was not easy as entering into contracts with Iranian nationals is prohibited under US sanctions regime, an example of the ability of private citizens to achieve where politicians cannot. Since joining the NBA, Ehadadi has served as a cultural ambassador and even meeting and shaking hands with an Israeli NBA player Omri Casspi.

Another example is the frequent Greco-wrestling exchanges between Iran and the US that were also begun during the Clinton-Khatami period. These exchanges have gone a long way in simply establishing a dialogue upon which to foster understanding. During the exchanges, both Iranians and Americans take advantage of the off-mat time to meet their foreign counterparts and learn more about each other's respective cultures. After a recent competition in 2007, member of the Iranian Junior Wrestling delegation, Abbas Ali Genii said, "this program has changed my outlook on the United States. I really felt the spirit of cooperation and friendship".³³

Yet athletics aren't the only thing that can unite Iranians and Americans. In March of 2010, an American film delegation of actors and producers visited their Iranian counterparts.³⁴ The visit was not without controversy, as Ahmadinejad's cultural advisor demanded the delegation first apologize for negative depictions on Iran in American movies. Regardless, Hollywood Producer Sidney Ganis described the focus of his trip to Iran this way, "To communicate with our fellow filmmakers....to meet, talk to, express, visit with, understand the problems of Iranian filmmakers, and express to them universal problems of filmmaking and just generally exchange ideas." When asked about future possibilities of cooperation Ganis replied, "Well, we're ready to go, filmmakers to filmmakers. That's why we're here. We're open; the Iranian filmmakers are also open, to even more mutual dialogue."³⁵

In closing, few nations have maintained their mutual animosity as Iran and the US have. Simply having conflicts is not a good enough explanation for thirty years of bitterness. Russia and Germany have cordial if not good relations; two of America's strongest allies, Japan and Germany were at one time mortal enemies of the US. Something lies at the heart of the US-Iran issue. This study suggests that internal Iranian politics have combined to create a dynamic where re-establishing US relations amounts to political suicide as leader after leader use an anti-American slant to slander opponents. Additionally, the regime in Iran uses the threat of American intervention to maintain its control over many of its people.

³² http://www.nba.com/grizzlies/news/grizzlies_sign_hamed_haddadi-080828.html, retrieved April 15, 2010

³³ <http://exchanges.state.gov/sports/envoy/takhti.html>, retrieved march 12, 2010

³⁴ <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/03/a-delegation-of.html>, retrieved march 23, 2010

³⁵ <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/03/a-delegation-of.html>

At the same time, the US perpetuates the conflict simply because it can. As the world's last superpower, there is little that Iran can do to compel the US's behavior. Leadership in the US seems to take the position that the responsibility to make the first move rests solely on Iran; Obama's 'unclenched fist' statement being a good example of this policy. In either case, governments have only succeeded to institutionalize disagreements. All of this works counter to what the people of each nation desire. Both sides have expressed a desire to conduct talks.

In September of 2009, Iranian and US diplomats publicly met in Geneva Switzerland. While some suggest that these meeting have been conducted for years on an unofficial level, it does show a sincere attempt to discuss issues if not evidence of a new phase in Iranian-US relations.