

# SURROUNDED:



## Seeing the World from IRAN'S Point of View

Houman A. Sadri, Ph.D.

*We can tell them we want them to stop that, but if there's any hope of the Iranians living according to the international rule of law and stopping, for instance, their nuclear weapons development, we can't just talk to them. If they don't play by the rules, we've got to use our force, and to me that would include taking military action to stop them from doing what they're doing.*

—Senator Joseph Lieberman,  
*Face the Nation*, CBS News,  
10 June 2007

*Bomb Iran, Bomb bomb bomb...*

—sung by Sen. John McCain to the tune of Beach Boy song "Barbara Ann" in response to a question regarding Middle Eastern foreign policy options at Murrells Inlet VFW Hall in South Carolina.

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PHOTO: An Iranian protester holds a banner defending his country's nuclear activities at a demonstration to mark the 28th anniversary of the Islamic revolution, Tehran, 11 February 2007. (AP Photo/ Hasan Sarbakhshian)

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**S**INCE 1979, when the Islamic revolution in Iran effectively severed diplomatic and security ties between Tehran and Washington, international tit-for-tat media stories have become the norm in the U.S.-Iran relationship. Recently, however, there has been an ominous new twist as the focus has shifted to reporting on Iranian efforts to acquire a nuclear capability together with U.S. diplomatic responses—including clear threats—aimed at preventing Iran from doing so. The main question now is, Are the United States and Iran on a collision course?

The crux of the current matter is ostensibly this: the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) insists on its right as a sovereign nation to acquire nuclear technology for peaceful use, while the Bush administration asserts that the IRI really wants the technology in order to produce nuclear weapons with which it can threaten its neighbors and dominate the oil-rich Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Because the United States and much of Western Europe depend on the region for energy, the Bush administration claims that Iran's move cannot be tolerated, so the issue is at the UN Security Council.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, interest in this issue is global, especially because the U.S. Government has publicly vilified the IRI and its revolution for decades, characterizing both as international threats. Consequently, the reading public has become accustomed to seeing Iran singled out for criticism by U.S. policy makers. Prior to the nuclear issue, U.S. media coverage focused mainly on Iran's support for supposed terrorist groups, its attempts to export its Islamic revolution to other nations, and its determined opposition to Israel. Thus, long before the latest impasse over nuclear technology, news associated with Tehran frequently captured headlines.

Yet, for all its public posturing in the media and diplomatic animus toward Iran, the United States has done shockingly little to resolve policy differences with its antagonist, even when significant opportunities have presented themselves. Instead, since 1979, American leaders have shaped their policies toward Iran through the unforgiving and non-pragmatic prism of the Iranian hostage crisis. As a result, they have consistently failed to seek the real causes of current policy disagreements or to pursue mutually acceptable solutions with Iran itself. In short, U.S. policy makers do not understand contemporary Iran and, frankly, have shown little interest in doing so.

This essay aims to help bridge the chasm of understanding by introducing a little of Iran's perspective, which has been a missing vital dimension of the current U.S. national and international debate. I offer my observations in the hope that they will encourage initiatives aimed at a new engagement policy, one that will mitigate the chances of an unintended or needlessly escalated conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

## Iran's Worldview: U.S. Policy of Strategic Encirclement

An initial sense of the Iranian leadership's current worldview may be best perceived simply by looking at a map of the Middle East as seen through their eyes. As a Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guard) officer once expressed to me while discussing Iran's security situation depicted on a map on his office wall, most Iranian leaders now share, with increasing anxiety, the common view that the U.S. is following a policy of gradually encircling Iran with hostile American forces based in neighboring countries. They note that 30 years ago the U.S. had only a couple of military bases in the region—ironically, located in Iran itself. Now, U.S. bases are in all the Persian Gulf states except Iran, and in one form or another, U.S. forces are in all of Iran's neighboring states—Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey—except for Turkmenistan. Moreover, the U.S. has special ties with Pakistan (a supposed ally against Al-Qaeda), Turkey (a NATO ally that has a special defense treaty with Israel), and Azerbaijan (where hundreds of American military advisors with equipment are pouring into a country whose oil industry is already closely tied

to U.S. interests).<sup>3</sup> Along with this gradual buildup of forces, U.S. leaders from both political parties have kept up a steady stream of threatening rhetoric, publicly calling for regime change in Iran. This is a cause for special alarm, given U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001.

Thus, Iranian leaders ask themselves, under such conditions, what should any independent, sovereign nation prudently do to ensure its own survival? What, for example, would the U.S. do if a powerful foreign nation spouting unending political rhetoric and threats against it, including open support for the overthrow of its government, were to engage in a sustained policy of building military bases and stationing military forces in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean?

## U.S. Inconsistency on Nuclear Issues

From the Iranian perspective, U.S. policy toward Iran is actually mystifying, if not irrational, because it runs counter to what many assert would be in the U.S.'s best long-term interests, both regionally and globally. For Iranian leaders, such puzzling ambiguity is evident in what they perceive to be the capricious way in which the U.S. attempts to have international laws and conventions applied to various nations. This is especially true with regard to countries it seeks to have declared in violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). For example, why does the U.S. want Iran treated as a pariah in the international community, but encourages relative deference to India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan—countries that more than a few observers believe have violated the NPT in acquiring nuclear capabilities?

In the eyes of many Iranian leaders, the baffling inconsistency is exemplified in the different policy approaches the U.S. has towards Iran and Pakistan. To justify their opposition to Iran's nuclear program, U.S. leaders have frequently promoted international concern over the emergence of a so-called "Islamic nuclear bomb." Yet the Islamic nuclear bomb already exists, in Pakistan, and has for some time. Although Pakistan clearly violated the same standards of international law to acquire nuclear weapons, the U.S. has neither censured Pakistan nor called for international sanctions against it. Quite the opposite occurred: the U.S. has cultivated cordial relations

with Islamabad and sought common ground with it on a host of issues of mutual concerns. The U.S. has done this despite the highly questionable legitimacy of President Pervez Musharaf's military dictatorship, Pakistan's poor human rights record, its clear instability as a nation, and a great amount of evidence indicating widespread corruption in government. These factors, together with Pakistan's maintenance of nuclear weapons and development of delivery systems, have barely slowed massive U.S. aid to Musharaf's regime.

The inequity of treatment is especially confusing to Iranian leaders because the U.S.'s preferential treatment of Pakistan continues even though Islamabad has proven to be a lackluster partner in the War on Terrorism. Not only has Musharaf cut a deal with Pakistan's Northwest Province tribal leaders (who shelter Al-Qaeda and the Taliban) assuring them that he would not to interfere with their de facto self-governance, but there is also considerable evidence that Pakistan's intelligence service is actually helping the Taliban reestablish itself in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan continues to tolerate the existence on its soil of large numbers of Wahhabi-supported madrassas, religious schools with anti-American/anti-Western curricula that have been breeding grounds for terrorists, some of whom have been identified as attackers of the U.S. and its allies.

The Iranians are just as mystified by the U.S. response to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Despite verbal threats and test missile launches clearly aimed at intimidating Japan, America's closest ally in the Far East, the U.S. has offered to help Kim Jong-il build advanced nuclear reactors (although for so-called peaceful purposes). If such an offer were made to Iran, U.S. policy makers might be shocked by the positive results for all concerned.

Looking at how the U.S. deals with Pakistan and North Korea, Iranian leaders must have a hard time understanding what real obstacles stand in the way of cooperation between their country and the U.S. This is doubly true because in many ways, both nations are natural allies in the world's current security environment: they have a common interest in cooperating against international terrorism, which targets both Shi'a and Western targets with equal malevolence.

Regardless, the U.S. continues to take every opportunity to vilify Iran publicly by highlight-






ing "unconstructive Iranian moves" that constitute "mounting evidence" of Tehran's nefarious regional intentions. Particularly insulting to Iran in what is perceived as a campaign of defamation was President Bush's public assertion, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, that Iran was one of three nations in a worldwide "axis of evil" (the other two being North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq). In attaching such a label to Iran, Bush discounted the fact that neither Iran nor any Iranian national had any involvement whatsoever in the 9/11 attacks; in fact, the attackers all came from Saudi Arabia, America's so-called regional ally. Moreover, the label was attached even though Iran was one of the few countries in the world to allow mass expressions of solidarity with the 9/11 victims, with tens of thousands of Iranians conducting candlelight vigils in Tehran and other Iranian cities immediately after the attacks to show sympathy for and solidarity with the victims.

For many Iranian leaders, such a clearly skewed vision on the part of U.S. policy makers implies a calculated proclivity for selective perception that is clearly not at the maturity level expected of the world's lone remaining superpower. Moreover, the clear ignorance and lack of discernment about the true state of affairs (no weapons of mass destruction) that led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq is alarming to many Iranian leaders. To them it provides evidence that the sheer clumsiness of future miscalculations on the part of the U.S. leadership regarding Iran could also needlessly precipitate conflict.

Iranian leaders perceive that Washington does not listen effectively, and it compounds this problem by only seeing what it wants to see, ignoring information that does not fit its preconceived policy paradigm. This is especially true regarding positive overtures made by Iran or other developments taking place in the country that could be profitable for U.S. interests, if properly understood.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Washington's tendency to focus only on those Iranian actions that can be used as evidence to foster a negative image of Iran among Washington policy circles is viewed with great suspicion by some Iranian leaders. They see it as part of a long-term plan conceived by the U.S. to promote an international perception that would lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy about Iran that might be used as justification for military action against it.



**LEGEND**

-  Major airfields either in current use or formerly used for coalition military operations
-  Countries in which U.S. ground forces are stationed or from which combat operations have been launched within the last 4 years
-  Countries from which heliborne combat operations were launched within the last 4 years
-  Naval base
-  Afloat naval forces

Sources: DOD webpage, CENTCOM public affairs office, and open-source media including CNN and Global Security.org.

**Summary (as of 21 May 2007)  
of coalition forces in region**

<b>U.S. Troops</b>	<b>227,000</b>
<b>Coalition Troops</b>	<b>19,000</b>
<b>Combat Aircraft</b>	<b>1,300+</b>
<b>Combatant Ships</b>	<b>40+</b>

**Coalition Partners**

<b>Iraq</b>	<b>26 nations</b>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	<b>18 nations</b>
<b>Horn of Africa</b>	<b>8 nations</b>



## Learning to Dance with Iran

It takes two to tango. The U.S. and Iran are like partners dancing the tango, but each with a different sense of beat and rhythm. As one missteps, the other misunderstands, so that each one questions the talent and capability of the other. However, differences can be overcome if each partner has a desire to cooperate. And so far, in the Iranian view, the U.S. has shown no such desire to dance, as evinced by its having ignored several opportunities to begin a dialogue with Iran on rapprochement.

Many in the IRI Government assert that Washington's concern over Iran's potential nuclear capability is not the real obstacle impeding improved relations between it and the U.S. at all. It is the unresolved historical issues between the U.S. and Iran, many predating the 1979 revolution, that have to be resolved before the two nations can begin to normalize relations.<sup>5</sup>

To be fair, I have to state that there are some who have a different theory. Many who have examined detailed and focused academic research and are familiar with the diverse views regularly expressed by Iranian officials confidently assert that the Iranian nuclear program, Iranian support for what it regards as fraternal revolutionary movements in other nations, and even the nature of Iran's anti-Israeli stand can be best understood as effects or symptoms of policy that stem from the evolving character of the Iranian revolution. Those who hold this view would say that if you are to deal with Iran, the most important question to ask is, How should we deal with the effects of the Iranian Islamic revolution?

I have to agree with the first group. The problems between Tehran and Washington did not originate, as some observers claim, with Bush's axis of evil speech, nor did they begin with the 1979 hostage crisis. The roots of the current unease have to do with unresolved historical issues between the U.S. and Iran as far back as the U.S.-engineered coup in 1953 that returned a monarch to power.<sup>6</sup>

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## Brief Summary of Historical Points of Tension

Prior to 1953, many Iranian intellectuals and opposition members were enamored of American ideals and policies. Seeking to emulate the U.S. and leverage its power in the defense of national interests, these Iranians promoted U.S. involvement in Iranian political affairs, hoping that it would counterbalance and check the British and Russian rivalry for influence that had long beggared the country.

Known as "The Great Game," this rivalry had led to the division of Iran into two large spheres of influence in 1907. Iranians of all stripes were humiliated by such blatant foreign interference. A proud people, they regarded themselves as disgraced heirs to an ancient civilization, a glorious history, and a culture with impressive achievements in art and science. Their resentment led to the development of an anti-hegemonic spirit in Iran and the attempt to enlist the "distanced and disinterested" Americans on their behalf. Their strategy included establishing diplomatic and trade missions with the U.S. and hiring American advisors, including the well-known U.S. financial consultant Morgan Shuster.<sup>7</sup> The strategy of promoting American support appeared to bear its initial fruit in 1946, when American diplomatic pressure forced Joseph Stalin to abandon plans to set up two satellite states on Iranian soil.

However, courting the Americans eventually backfired because, once the U.S. was established as an economic and political force in Iran, its involvement in cold-war competition with the Soviet Union became another "Great Game." One result was that the U.S. began to look upon Iran as merely a pawn to check Soviet influence.

The most egregious action stemming from American involvement in Iran occurred in 1953, when the U.S. helped engineer a coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran. This coup reinstated the Shah, Reza Pahlavi, on the Peacock Throne. American policy makers backed Pahlavi because they viewed him as both more anti-Soviet and more likely to support U.S. economic interests in his country, especially in the oil industry. Subsequently, the CIA (together with Israel's Mossad) helped to establish SAVAK, the Shah's infamous internal

security force, to curb popular uprisings.<sup>8</sup> SAVAK soon penetrated every layer of Iranian society, successfully targeting opposition leaders and creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and distrust.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, SAVAK became a hated symbol not only of the Shah's oppression, but also of foreign, and especially U.S., interference in the country. In short, the coup and subsequent actions to stabilize the Shah blackened America's reputation among most Iranians.

Although the U.S. enjoyed the fealty of the Shah and his government after the coup, Iran's intellectuals, secular and nationalist politicians, and Islamists never forgave America for toppling Mossadegh's nationalist government and reinstating Pahlavi.<sup>10</sup> Though Iran would make great economic and technological advances under the latter, resentment against him and his U.S. sponsors simmered among opposition leaders and the Iranian people from 1953 on. In 1979, that resentment boiled over.

## The Islamic Revolution of 1979

The almost universal ill will created by the Shah's rule culminated in a spontaneous revolution that led to the wholesale expulsion of the U.S. presence in 1979. American policy makers were shocked, at least partly because U.S. intelligence experts had grossly underestimated both the deep public resentment that the Iranian populace had toward the U.S. and the depth of influence the revolution's core leadership, Iran's Shi'a mullahs, had as a political force—even though the latter had played a prominent role in the 1951 nationalist uprising that deposed the Shah (for the first time) and brought Mossadegh to power.

Anti-U.S. sentiment came to be personified by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's senior cleric and the revolution's principal leader. Post-revolution, Khomeini consolidated his authority over the government at mass rallies by demonizing the U.S. for its support of the Shah and its role in subsidizing the Shah's crimes against the Iranian people.<sup>11</sup> America lost its last opportunity to salvage what it could of its image among the Iranian people during this tumultuous period when President Jimmy Carter, under pressure from such political voices as former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, allowed the fleeing Shah to seek medical treatment in the U.S., then gave him political asylum and refused



Former Iranian prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh during court proceedings at a military tribunal trying him for treason, 20 November 1953.



Picture of the imperial family of Iran after the coronation of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as Shah of Iran, 26 October 1967.

to hand him over to Iran for trial. Carter's actions led many Iranians to suspect that the U.S. was planning another 1953-style coup to return the Shah to the throne once more. Particularly agitated were Islamist student groups, who responded by seizing the U.S. embassy and American diplomats, hoping to exchange their hostages for the Shah and prevent the rumored coup. Thus, the hostage crisis, which Carter interpreted as an aggressive move against U.S. interests, was in the eyes of those who initiated it a justifiable defensive measure aimed at saving the new revolution.<sup>12</sup>

## In the Aftermath of a Lost Ally

The U.S. felt the Shah's fall keenly. Despite international concerns about human rights violations and other problems, Washington had, until the Carter administration, solidly supported the Shah, regarding him as a key ally in its attempt to contain Soviet expansion into the region. From President Eisenhower on, successive administrations had turned a blind eye to reported abuses and given the Shah wide-ranging diplomatic, economic, and military support. For example, Washington sold him many fully equipped F-14 Tomcats—the most sophisticated fighter-bomber in the U.S. arsenal at the time.

Still dealing with its defeat in Vietnam and facing setbacks in Central America and elsewhere, the U.S. viewed the rise of an openly antagonistic Islamic state as a great danger to American personnel and interests globally. Additionally, the seizure of its embassy, together with the taking of its citizens as hostages, was viewed as an insufferable international humiliation that could not go unanswered without inviting other such attacks against its interests globally.

Among all attacks on the U.S. embassies abroad, it is important to recall that Iranian students held 52 Americans hostage in November 1979, but none of the Americans were killed. In contrast, two Americans were killed in Pakistan when a mob set the U.S. embassy on fire in Islamabad two weeks later, but the U.S. took no serious measures against the Pakistani Government, which had failed to defend the embassy.<sup>13</sup>



One of 60 U.S. hostages, blindfolded and with his hands bound, is displayed to the crowd outside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by Iranian hostage takers, 9 November 1979. Some of the militant students who seized the embassy in the Iranian capital flank the hostage.

AP

## U.S. Support of Saddam in the Iran-Iraq War

The opportunity to blunt the “dangerous” revolutionary Islamic fervor spilling out of Iran and to exact a measure of revenge for the hostage crisis came soon for the U.S. In September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran to seize disputed territories with potential oil reserves. However, suspicion was high in Tehran that Iraq had proceeded with tacit U.S. encouragement and support, almost as a proxy to contain the Islamic revolution and take revenge on Iran's government.

This suspicion seemed confirmed when the U.S. established full diplomatic relations with Iraq, despite the latter's longstanding anti-American, anti-Israeli rhetoric and policies. Though Washington claimed neutrality, from Tehran's perspective the U.S. had clearly sided with Saddam, giving him material and diplomatic aid to isolate Iran on the world stage. The U.S. could also be seen as supporting Iraq by using delay-and-distract tactics whenever Iran complained to the UN and other international bodies about Iraq's use of chemical weapons, attacks on civilian centers, and harassment of international oil shipping in the Persian Gulf. Washington also gave Baghdad money, food, equipment, technology, and, most importantly, intelligence in its campaign against Tehran. Khomeini



probably best described the Iranian perception of the conflict when he called it the “imposed war.”

As the war proceeded, the U.S. clearly sought occasion to become more directly involved. It used the 1987 Iraqi attack on the USS *Stark*, in which 37 American Sailors died, as an excuse to begin escorting Kuwaiti tankers. Having increased its presence in the Gulf, the U.S. Navy informally entered the war against Iran, as American ships regularly challenged Iranian forces. Washington also showed zero tolerance toward any Iranian military effort to inhibit Saddam’s supporters in the Gulf. For instance, when the USS *Roberts* hit a mine in the Persian Gulf—with no loss of life—the U.S. Navy used the incident to justify destroying the Iranian Navy in a single day (28 April 1988) during Operation Praying Mantis.



DOD

A port quarter view of the guided missile frigate USS STARK (FFG 31) listing to port after being struck by an Iraqi-launched Exocet missile, May 1987.

Some Revolutionary Guard naval officers have opined that America’s burning desire to side with Iraq by provoking confrontations with Iran created a trigger-happy atmosphere among U.S. forces that eventually led to one of the war’s worst tragedies: the downing of an Iranian airliner by the USS *Vincennes*. The airliner was on a routine flight over the Gulf; the *Vincennes* was equipped with the most sophisticated radar. Two hundred-ninety civilian passengers died in the incident.<sup>14</sup> The event shocked Iran and provided what many Iranians considered clear proof of American support for

Iraq’s invasion and its attempt to topple the revolutionary government.

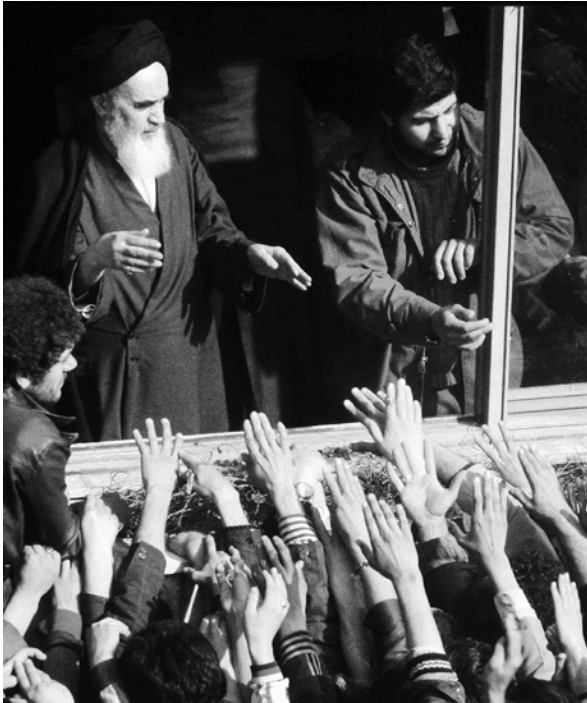
Several commentators have suggested since that the *Vincennes* incident helped pressure Tehran into a cease-fire with Baghdad, ending the eight-year war. However, it was neither the destruction of Iran’s navy (the smallest Iranian force) nor the psychological shock of the airliner tragedy that finally forced Iran to accept a cease-fire. Rather, the IRI’s leaders finally recognized that, despite heavy Iranian sacrifices, they could not overcome Iraq’s superior tactical position and military hardware. Just as important, it became clear that the U.S. and its allies had the ability to prevent Iran from ending the war on terms favorable to itself. In the end, Tehran bitterly but pragmatically accepted diplomatic moves aimed at ending the war—a decision Khomeini likened to “drinking poison.”

Nevertheless, from the Iranian point of view, the long and costly war secured what the IRI leadership prized most: the survival of the revolutionary regime. For Tehran, this prize was as sweet as the American commitment not to interfere in Iranian affairs at the Algerian negotiations that ended the 1979 hostage crisis. (In fact, the U.S. commitment at the time was so significant for the IRI that Tehran agreed to accept the freezing of its assets and cooperate with American and international courts processing lawsuits against the IRI.)

## Khomeini’s Death and a Change in Direction

With Khomeini’s death shortly after the war, the IRI’s ideological era ended. Ayatollah Khamenei was picked to replace Khomeini as supreme leader. Although Khamenei’s selection required a great deal of compromise (his clerical rank was much lower than Khomeini’s), he and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani soon initiated the next chapter of IRI history.<sup>15</sup> Their policies would be more nationalistic, pragmatic, and inwardly directed. Their major task, to rebuild the war-torn country, proved to be a humbling experience. One consequence was that the IRI learned the limits of its revolutionary message. It also came to accept Iraq’s status as the Gulf’s premier power. With the passing of the ideological and uncompromising Khomeini, Iran became more diplomatically accommodating toward regional and global powers.





AFP

The Islamic revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, greeted 2 February 1979 in Tehran by his supporters during his return to Iran after 15 years in exile in Iraq and France.

## Saddam's Attack on Kuwait

Manifesting his characteristic unpredictability and treachery and enticed by an exhausted Iran ruled by untested leaders, Saddam Hussein resumed his campaign to expand Iraq's borders in 1990 by seizing Kuwait and threatening Saudi Arabia, even though both had generously supported him in his war with Iran.

Iraq's occupation of Kuwait was unacceptable to Iran's leaders, but they did not have enough residual military capability to challenge Saddam's well-equipped, battle-ready forces. Nor was there enough public support for another war: with a half-million killed in the 1980s war, most Iranians had no appetite for another conflict. Instead, public pressure pushed for efforts to recognize the war dead. In many cities, the water in pools and fountains ran red, to represent the blood of martyrs killed in action.<sup>16</sup> When the shrewd Saddam unexpectedly withdrew from all Iranian territory gained in the Iran-Iraq War, he dampened what little inclination the Iranian populace might have had for another conflict with Iraq.

As history attests, Saddam was less successful in co-opting the U.S. The brutal nature of Iraq's

aggression against Kuwait and its direct threat to Saudi Arabia persuaded the U.S. that Saddam was an unreliable ally, one on the verge of dominating the world's oil supplies. Washington concluded that it had to act to evict Iraqi forces, return the Amir of Kuwait to power, and significantly reduce Iraq's military capability. In the end, the U.S.-led coalition that pummeled Iraq during Operation Desert Storm ushered in a new regional status quo, with Iran and Iraq more or less on a par.

## The Golden Rules

While even a brief summary of the history between Iran and the U.S. should help explain the vexed nature of the two countries' relationship, there is another means that might throw some light on Iran's current worldview. Adapted from biology, the Golden Rules model assesses the imperatives and needs of nations through a biological lens, as if nations are organisms that go through similar life cycles. There are three Golden Rules.

**Golden Rule #1.** The first Golden Rule suggests that political entities such as countries or regimes manifest the same imperative to survive as living organisms; i.e., they try to survive at any cost, even when facing unfavorable odds. For example, many small European countries fought stoutly against Nazi invasion during World War II despite little hope of success. In 1776, the 13 loosely affiliated and relatively undeveloped American colonies showed the same kind of determination to survive as a country when they declared independence and fought against the superpower of the time, Great Britain. In fact, the U.S. War of Independence is a classic example of a revolutionary state, motivated by what it regarded as great ideals, refusing to bow down before a much stronger foreign power.

It is important to understand that Iran views its Islamic revolution as a similarly heroic stand against a very aggressive and intimidating alien power—specifically, the U.S.

Although its revolution differed from the U.S.'s in kind (religious versus secular) and outcome (the IRI has a supreme leader and Guardian Council who eclipse its popularly elected parliament, the Majlis), Iran sees itself as having no less courageously survived for almost three decades the intimidation, physical attacks, and international pressures sponsored by the era's foremost superpower. In the Iranian

mind, the struggle against the U.S. and the repulse of Iraq's U.S.-assisted invasion in the 1980s constitute an epic story of national struggle and regime survival purchased at heavy human and material cost.<sup>17</sup>

Some Iranian clerics assert that the nation's commitment to the struggle was, and is, a product of the inherently anti-hegemonic character of the Islamic revolution. They claim that the guiding principles of Iran's Islamic nonalignment strategy have been associated with the revolution from its beginning.<sup>18</sup> Others assert instead that the IRI merely benefited from long and deeply held anti-hegemonic feeling that stemmed from national pride in Iran's ancient roots and bitter memories of the Great Game era.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the case, Iranians take as much pride in their revolution as Americans do in their's. They revere the events of 1978-79 as the start of Iran's move into the upper echelon of the world's nations.

**Golden Rule #2.** According to the second Golden Rule, political entities that survive inevitably seek to grow and develop. History shows that countries, once established, use their natural and human resources, capital, and technology to pursue full development. Again, the U.S. provides a significant example.

When it declared independence in 1776, the U.S. was, as aforementioned, analogous to one of today's undeveloped countries. However, due to limited foreign interference in its domestic affairs (a result of geographic isolation) and access to fabulously abundant natural resources, revolutionary America began a process of economic, military, and political development that enabled it to reach great-power status by the turn of the 20th century. The U.S. continued to develop until it reached superpower status after WWII. With regard to what the future might hold, some experts suggest that there is a cyclical pattern to the life of any great nation: its power and prestige culminate at a certain point, and it begins to slide into irreversible decline—a tenet in keeping with the biological basis of the Golden Rule.<sup>20</sup> Whether the U.S. is near or has already reached such a point is being heatedly debated. Obviously, no one can definitively predict what the future holds for the U.S.—the model is only a model.

Unlike U.S. leaders, who see themselves as leading a relatively new world power, Iran's leaders see themselves as heirs of an ancient, proud, and multifaceted culture with varied origins. Such influences include a cultural legacy from the ancient

Persian Empire and the 7th-century introduction of Islam. Because Iranian national history goes back more than 5,000 years (versus the U.S.'s 230+) and encompasses several life cycles of growth and decline, Iranians interpret events through a much different historical prism. They see their Islamic revolution as the beginning of another life cycle of national growth destined to make them once again a great regional power.

One does not have to look hard to find evidence that Iran is on an upward azimuth in the world. Economically, politically, and militarily, all signs point to progress.

*Economic development.* Most observers note that the IRI economy has developed significantly since 1979. Islamic Iran's official annual growth rate is 6 percent. While that still lags behind the double-digit growth rate of the Shah's era, it has been achieved in the face of two major handicaps to growth: the long war with Iraq, during which the economy actually declined; and the U.S.-led containment strategy, with its decades of international sanctions that have included imposing trade restrictions, freezing assets, limiting direct foreign investment, and preventing Tehran from joining the World Trade Organization.<sup>21</sup>

In Iran, the theocratic character of the Islamic Republic obscures the reality that electoral considerations play an important role in politics. Since the Shah's fall in 1979, there have been nine presidential and seven parliamentary elections. Although the elections are open only to candidates approved by the clerical leadership, the campaigning and voting are taken seriously by the population. In 1997 a reformist cleric, Muhammad Khatami, won the election in a landslide after the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, openly endorsed Khatami's conservative opponent...The undeniable and serious flaws in their country's electoral process have not prevented Iranians from learning about democratic practices and internalizing democracy-friendly values. Indeed, the debate over democracy has been near the heart of Iranian politics for a decade now.

—*Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr<sup>22</sup>

*Political growth.* Politically, the IRI has made many remarkable changes. In constructing its unique political system, Iran has combined many Western ideals, institutions, and values with indigenous political concepts. The result, one rarely acknowledged by U.S. policy makers and Western media, is that Iran's political system works. Even though candidates for office must be approved by the Guardian Council, the political system is stable and elections are competitive. The Guardian Council notwithstanding, Iran is not, as many Americans think, an unsophisticated theocracy. The Majlis is a surprisingly freewheeling body that openly and hotly debates a wide range of political issues, including nationalization of industry versus privatization, threats posed by the U.S. and Al-Qaeda, and even rapprochement with the U.S. Moreover, the pendulum in the Majlis swings between a clearly recognizable left and right. In fact, elections have so far produced two very different presidents, one a progressive reformer (Muhammad Khatami, 1997-2005), the other a hard-line conservative (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 2005 to the present).

The current system works in large part because of a collective willingness to cooperate: Iran's lawmakers have a strong sense of national identity not often found in the Middle East. In the Majlis, representatives of Iran's culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse population have generally learned how to balance their own parochial concerns with those that serve the national interest.

The Majlis may not enjoy all the constitutional prerogatives and authority that its American and European counterparts do, but it is not the rubber-stamp committee that once served the Shah. Besides serving as a forum for genuine debate, it exercises a measure of real authority over the development of law (even though its legislation is still subject to veto by the supreme leader or the Guardian Council). Additionally, executive political power in Islamic Iran is more decentralized than it was in the Shah's day, when the monarch held all power. In another democratic improvement, Iran has incorporated the American "checks and balances" principle into its system by spreading decision-making authority among diverse policy-making bodies, including among the clerics.<sup>23</sup>

Even in its current, still-early stage of development, the Iranian system offers better democratic representation than any other comparable system or

legislative body in the Islamic Middle East.<sup>24</sup> No such open parliament can be found anywhere else in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea regions, not even among such advanced states and staunch U.S. allies as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.<sup>25</sup>

With some modifications, Iran's political system could serve as a model for the development of other regional democratic institutions. The U.S., which has declared that it supports the development of democratic institutions in the Middle East, should take note and strongly support Iran's progress even if it does not specifically mirror Western models.

*Military development.* Like its government, Iran's military machine has evolved significantly since the early days of the revolution, when it still depended almost entirely on the U.S. for hardware, parts, supplies, technology, and advisors. After Iraq invaded in 1980, the Iranian military was so disorganized that it could not even find the tires for its F-4s, F-5s, and F-14s, or the tracks for its American-made tanks—they were lost in the supply system.<sup>26</sup> Chaos reigned in the services, mainly because the new regime had purged the U.S.-trained regular forces of anybody whose loyalty was even remotely suspect, and had then established a parallel force called the Pasdaran, or Revolutionary Guard (RG).

The IRI's original plan was to duplicate the functions of the old regular force, then demobilize it when the RG was ready. But because the latter had not had sufficient time to develop when Iraq crossed the border, the new government decided to keep the Shah's old military more or less intact.



Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard special forces participate in military maneuvers near the Persian Gulf, 3 April 2006.

AFP PHOTO/FARS NEWS/STR



Officers who had survived the revolution only to be jailed were freed (especially U.S.-trained pilots) to exonerate themselves through service. Ironically, Iraq's invasion gave new life—often literally—to the old Iranian military.

When the war ended in 1988, the IRI decided to retain both its regular and RG units. This double structure has led to what some regard as a sense of healthy competition between the two, fostering excellence. It also allows the regime to play off one arm against the other, a balancing strategy that gives the government tighter control of the military while assuring the loyalty of all military units.<sup>27</sup> In fact, this balancing act has given Iranian civilian leaders more power over their military than their Turkish counterparts have had over theirs. (The Turkish military has a pattern of intervening in Turkish politics.) That said, the RG's capture of 15 British sailors on 23 March 2007 suggests that the RG might be moving from its traditional role of policy implementer to policy formulator.

Saddam's invasion also forced Iran to speed up development of its own military-industrial capacity, a necessity caused by the U.S.'s refusal to provide spare parts to Iran. (Post-revolution, Iran has faced an American containment strategy that seriously restricts access to new technology, especially dual-use technology, and sources of armament.) Initially, the services tried to maintain their American-made equipment by cannibalizing some systems and by buying needed spare parts from countries like Vietnam, which had inherited a lot of American equipment after its war with the U.S.

Eventually, Iran was forced to begin manufacturing many parts. The next stage of development was to reverse-engineer both parts and equipment, an effort that created a new sense of national self-reliance and ingenuity. With hard work and persistence, the new attitude laid the foundation for an Iranian military-industrial complex able to produce a variety of materiel. The war had taught the IRI a major lesson: to protect its revolution, Iran had to maximize self-reliance and minimize dependence on foreign military equipment and technology.

Since then, one important indicator of Iran's ascendancy as a regional power has been its expansion of a substantial industrial base capable of supporting the development of a sophisticated military capability. In fact, the new military-indus-

trial complex is perhaps the most impressive sign of IRI growth, not least because it has given the country a large measure of independence from the international community. Furthermore, a new generation of engineering students (studying at home and abroad) has enabled the Islamic Republic to narrow the quality gap between Iranian and Western military technology and equipment. This improvement became apparent in July 2006, when Hezbollah nearly sank an Israeli warship in the Mediterranean using Iranian missiles.

Iran's relatively well developed military-industrial capability has poked a large hole in the U.S.'s containment strategy. It is now difficult, if not impossible, for any surgical strike to totally destroy such a capability. Iran's defense industry is now so dispersed and well protected that the most sophisticated U.S. bombing campaign could only temporarily delay any weapons program the U.S. deemed illegitimate.

Notwithstanding the gains its military has made, revolutionary Iran does not view itself as a direct military threat to America.<sup>28</sup> The media might tout the strength of conventional Iranian arms, but the IRI leadership knows that the U.S. has the best equipped, most professional military machine in the world, and that its own ability to deal with an all-out U.S. challenge is relatively limited. Still, Iran sees itself as having a formidable and increasingly capable force that would inflict a heavy price on any invading power, especially since its soldiers would be defending their own country on rough terrain very conducive to defense.

*Nuclear capability.* Having greatly improved its military might and gained a significant degree of autonomy, Iran now feels both justified and confident enough in its own capabilities to pursue homegrown nuclear technology. The same principle of self-reliant independence has marked this pursuit. Iran has taken smart steps to defend its facilities from outside attack, and its development program, unlike Iraq's in the early 80s and Libya's in the 90s, has mostly eschewed imported technology. Thus, the Iranian nuclear program is less vulnerable to an air raid like the one on Osirac (1981), in which Israel practically ended Baghdad's nuclear bid. Whereas Iraq's program was highly centralized and could be smashed with one big blow, Iran's is divided into many smaller projects dispersed over 50 heavily guarded, well-fortified locations throughout the country.



On the technical side, Iran's nuclear program might not be as sophisticated as those in the West, but it has made remarkable strides. For example, Tehran was able to produce yellow cake on its own, an accomplishment it showcased theatrically in 2006. Overall, the IRI is nearing a nuclear capability, one it has developed more or less independently.

U.S. policy makers recently appeared to acknowledge that limited attacks on Iran's nuclear centers would be extremely challenging and probably unsuccessful at ending Iran's nuclear aspirations. Diplomacy seems to be the only tenable solution, a position that President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have emphasized, at least nominally.

**Golden Rule #3.** The third and final Golden Rule of "national biology" is that a mature, thriving state will seek to reproduce itself. The rationale here is that states feel more secure in an environment filled with similar states governed by similar principles. When President Woodrow Wilson declared, "Let us make the world safe for democracy," he most likely meant a world safe for American-style democracy. In his view, the way to make the world safe was to increase the number of nations governed by similar political orders, especially those characteristic of the U.S. and Western Europe.

Although democracy has had great appeal since its inception, history shows that when the early Americans declared independence, they established a revolutionary state whose democratic ideals were perceived as dangerous by most European monarchies. In fact, even some of the founding fathers were not sure how democracy could operate in a manner that was not merely mob rule. Nevertheless, after more or less securing its own democracy (however imperfect) in the 19th century, the U.S. began to export such revolutionary concepts as popular sovereignty, representative government, separation of church and state, decentralization of power, checks and balances, and so on. At the time, it was one of the world's few democracies, but its form of government has since taken root in many places; these days, democracy is broadly viewed as a theoretically acceptable form of government whose establishment is often the goal of independence and revolutionary movements. As a result, two centuries after the American Revolution, the world seems at least somewhat safer for democracy.

Still, democracies constitute only a quarter of all countries. And moreover, to non-democratic

nations, democracy is still a radical idea, especially because it promotes such notions as legal and political equality, public accountability, and free and fair elections, all of which are foreign, atypical, and radical to societies with traditional one-man rule. In Iran, for example, the democratic notion of overall popular sovereignty is viewed as particularly threatening by the IRI's Islamic theocracy. For IRI leaders, Koranic law—as interpreted by the supreme leader and the Guardian Council—has sovereignty, not the people. Consequently, unchecked popular sovereignty is regarded as a threat to the very foundation of the IRI.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that Iran's leaders often feel threatened and under attack by the constant bombardment of ideas issuing from the U.S., whose values and ideals are popular among Iran's intellectuals and students.<sup>29</sup> The mullahs take this threat very seriously for several reasons: 75 percent of Iran's population is under 30 and attracted to Western ideas; many Iranian intellectuals were educated in the West; and many Iranians travel outside the country, have access to international media, and speak foreign languages, all of which bring them into contact with secular humanist values that tend to align themselves with support of popular sovereignty.

As regards its own "biological" inclination to reproduce, even Tehran has come to appreciate the limited appeal of its revolutionary message both inside and outside the region. How much of an ideological challenge, then, does the Iranian revolution pose to the status quo? The answer is "not much." It may have temporarily inspired underdog Shi'as throughout the region, but its fervor was relatively short-lived, and it has led to no real Shi'a political gains elsewhere. In yet another irony, the second largest Shi'a community in the world (Iraq) owes its ascendancy not to Iranian proselytizing, but to Washington's efforts to spread its own seed.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that Iran is not trying to project power into Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries: it provides material assistance to Iraq's Shi'a parties and to Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>31</sup> But such support does not necessarily translate into political influence. In fact, based on the comments of a number of RG officials, Iran has relatively little influence in Iraq, despite what American officials often assert to cover their own mistakes there.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, it practically goes without saying that Tehran's ideological message has virtually no appeal to Americans. It is certainly not the same kind of ideological threat to democracy and its economic corollary, capitalism, that Marxism was when the devastation wrought by the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s and by World War II in the 1940s called into question the ideological underpinnings of Western democracy and capitalism.

In summary, Iran has had very little success with the third Golden Rule. Three decades after its revolution, it has not succeeded in fostering another Islamic republic in its own image anywhere; to the contrary, the infatuation that regional Shi'a communities had for Iranian-style government is running thin. Azerbaijan, a Shi'a majority state, has expressed its distaste for an Islamic regime and cooperates closely with secular Turkey and the West, especially the U.S. Also, Shi'a communities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere are working with their Sunni-dominated regimes to gain greater domestic political and economic opportunities.<sup>33</sup>

## Relearning the Tango

Having touched upon the essential contentious issues of U.S./Iranian history and briefly analyzed the Iranian leadership's point of view through the prism of the Golden Rules to help explain the IRI's past and current behavior, it is time to consider a few principles that may be useful for the U.S. in developing a new approach to Iran.

According to Washington, the major obstacle to dealing with Iran has been the resistance of Iranian leaders to considering a dramatic shift in bilateral relations. From the Iranian perspective, that view is simply not true—Tehran has had several leaders who were quite willing to begin efforts at rapprochement with Washington, if American leaders had been willing to listen to and respect Iranian views. For Tehran, the U.S. expectation that such talks cannot take place until there is firm prospect of immediate progress is simplistic and impractical, considering the nature, duration, and complexity of relations between the two.

Many IRI leaders have also noted that when opportunities have presented themselves for possible engagement, Washington has made no real overtures toward the Iranian leadership—not even when small gestures of cooperation might have led

to more extensive interaction. Historically, such measures succeeded in getting the traditionally hostile Germans and French to sign the 1957 Treaty of Rome, a document pledging them to full-fledged partnership. Iran's leaders wonder aloud why Washington has forsworn such engagement with Iran.

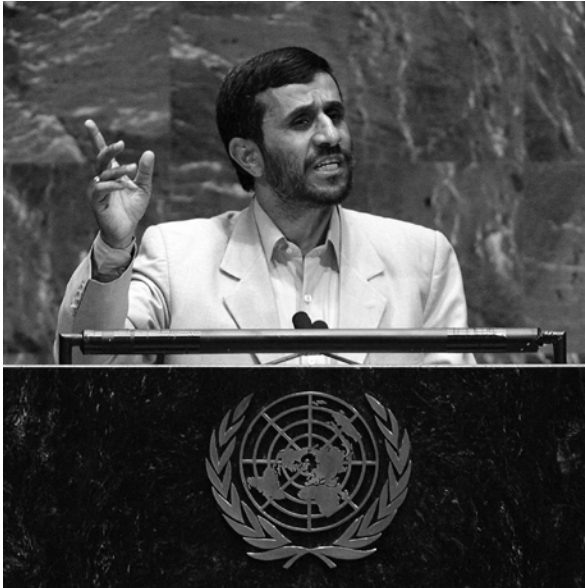
For example, in August 2006, IRI officials were puzzled by mixed American diplomatic signals. At the International Society of Iranian Studies conference, the U.S. expressed disappointment over the prospect of improving U.S.-Iran relations in the wake of President Ahmadinejad's election. One U.S. participant lamented that some Washington policy corners had been hoping for the emergence of a moderate Iranian leader who could jump-start negotiations. Immediately, an exasperated Iranian official replied that former President Khatami, known for his moderate stand, had sent numerous positive signals to Washington during his two 4-year terms in office, all of which were either ignored outright or obstructed by U.S. insistence on setting preconditions for negotiations. The Iranian official observed that, having been so shortsighted and obtuse, Washington deserved Ahmadinejad and whatever angst it felt for having jettisoned so casually such golden opportunities.<sup>34</sup>

Recently, another IRI official observed that even the hardliner Ahmadinejad had sent positive signals to President Bush, among them an 18-page letter in spring 2006, a speech at the UN, and interviews



Secretary-General Kofi Annan is greeted by the former president of Iran Muhammad Khatami, prior to a closed session of the High-Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, in Doha, Qatar, 26 February 2006.

UN Photo/Mark Garten



UN Photo/Marco Castro

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, addresses the general debate of the sixty-first session of the General Assembly at UN Headquarters in New York, 19 September 2006.**

with Diane Sawyer and other senior American correspondents.<sup>35</sup> True to form, Washington ignored Ahmadinejad's letter and laid down preconditions to any direct negotiations. Basically, many Iranian leaders have observed that the U.S. has chosen to outsource its foreign policy toward Iran through the "EU 3" (England, France, Germany), which naturally pursue their own strategic and policy priorities first in talks and negotiations.

Besides losing several chances to negotiate with the IRI's leaders, Washington has proven obdurate in other spheres that could have opened the door to normalized relations. In the mid-1990s, Iran and Conoco/Phillips reached a major cooperative agreement about oil and gas operations in the Persian Gulf. Instead of promoting the agreement as an entrée to talks with the IRI, the Clinton administration suddenly pulled the plug on the deal. Another major opportunity appeared immediately after September 11th, when the Iranian people held their candlelight vigils to show solidarity with the American people. Any slight expression of gratitude by the U.S. Government might have thawed the ice between Tehran and Washington, but only a few Americans even acknowledged the Iranian gesture.<sup>36</sup>

Later in 2001, during its campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Washington ignored perhaps its greatest opportunity to

A grassroots outpouring of sympathy for the victims of September 11 occurred on the streets in only two places in the Muslim world, both within days of the collapse of the twin towers and both among the Shia. The first was in Iran, where tens of thousands snubbed their government to go into the streets of Tehran and hold a candlelight vigil in solidarity with the victims of the attacks. The second was in Karachi, where a local party that is closely associated with the city's Shia broke with public mood in Pakistan to gather thousands to denounce terrorism.

—*Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr<sup>37</sup>

open channels with Tehran. Like the U.S., Iran, too, backed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban–Al-Qaeda axis (the real axis of evil in the Iranian view), and early on there were many tactical contacts between U.S. and IRI officials and forces to coordinate efforts—Tehran even allowed some U.S. planes to use its airspace. After the Taliban was defeated, IRI representatives attended the international donors' meeting and contributed very constructively to the Afghan reconstruction effort. Moreover, Iran's border with Afghanistan has been very peaceful since the Taliban fell.<sup>38</sup>

These developments suggest that Tehran and Washington were de facto strategic allies in 2001. But Washington failed to build on the precedent. Quite the opposite occurred: soon after Afghan President Hamid Karzai was elected, the U.S. dissuaded him from seeking closer ties with Iran. This has forced Karzai to walk a tightrope between the U.S. and his next-door neighbor and former ally. Nevertheless, Tehran, according to Karzai, is playing a constructive role in Afghanistan, and their relations are cordial.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, as a prelude to engagement, the U.S. must learn to acknowledge that Iran has undeniably legitimate interests in the internal affairs of its neighbors, just as the U.S. has legitimate interests in what happens internally in Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, or Canada. Tehran, for example, is legitimately concerned about the increase in opium production in Afghanistan, which leads to drug smuggling from Afghanistan to Iran. Not only does the drug trade destabilize areas along Iran's

border with Afghanistan, but also opium addiction in Iran has increased alarmingly, despite the severe punishment meted out to smugglers and drug dealers. This issue is leading to more cooperation (not conflict) between the two neighbors.

Most recently, the Iraq war has spawned another great chance to begin Iran-U.S. rapprochement. At the commencement of the conflict, IRI leaders, worried about possible consequences resulting from Saddam's quick collapse, approached Washington in the spring and summer of 2003. Again, however, the U.S. declined to talk.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, because no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq—the original justification for his decision to invade—President Bush has subsequently been forced to promote Iraq's potential as a role model for democracy in the Middle East. Thus, in retrospect, his decision to spurn Iran, the only Islamic nation in the Middle East with anything approaching a working democracy, looks to have been tragically shortsighted.

Moreover, as the situation in Iraq has gradually devolved into what some term an American quagmire, the dynamic of the U.S.-Iran relationship has changed. Because of Iran's close proximity to Iraq and close cultural ties with Iraq's Shi'a majority, the relationship has gone from one benefiting Washington to one favoring Tehran. Looking to its own interests beyond the nuclear crisis and President Ahmadinejad's inflammatory remarks, the U.S. should recognize the need to dramatically change its approach to Iran. Washington can wish upon a star for the rise of a moderate Iranian leader who might slavishly support its efforts in Iraq, but the hard facts of history clearly show that U.S. leaders failed to respond to repeated previous openings by Iranian leaders who, had they been treated with respect, might have become welcome partners, not antagonists, in resolving the Iraq crisis.

Moving forward, President Bush should learn from the errors of his predecessors, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. These men asked Iran for more accommodating gestures than they themselves were willing to give—even as they constricted all regular channels with Tehran. This unconstructive and hegemonic diplomacy led to the current situation in which the U.S. now has no direct political leverage over Iran except with military threats and by promoting international sanctions. As a result, forcing a change in Iranian behavior through

sanctions or direct military action has been discussed widely in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv.

## The Nuclear Crisis Redux

In addressing the nuclear crisis, Secretary of State Rice has stated that there are both incentives and sanctions for Iran—the choice is Iran's. However, this rhetoric has always been accompanied by undisguised threats, such as President Bush's insistence that "all options"—to include the military one—"are open." Vice President Dick Cheney has been even more bellicose, repeatedly calling for regime change in Iran. Here it is important to emphasize that there is a major difference between the current Iranian leadership's situation and that of the deposed Shah. Despite his negative public image, the Shah had many options for asylum when he left Iraq: several countries acknowledged that they would accept him. In contrast, the IRI's leaders do not have such options, because no other country in the world would likely grant them asylum. Therefore, Cheney's threats are particularly personal and have effectively forced leaders of the regime to dig in their heels. As true believers in the revolution, and having nowhere else to go, they will naturally fight to the finish to save Iran's revolution and themselves with it.

*The military option.* Although Bush has recently been emphasizing diplomacy to resolve his differences with Tehran over its nuclear program, he has clearly indicated that military force against Iran is a viable option.<sup>41</sup> With regard to such an option, despite setbacks in Iraq, there is little doubt that America's well-equipped and well-trained forces can and will dominate almost any conventional battlefield in the world. However, as the war in Iraq has also tragically demonstrated, winning battles is one thing, but securing victory, especially in a political war fought in the streets among an occupied people, can be something completely different.

After four years of fighting in which nearly 3,600 U.S. Soldiers, 7,000 Iraqi Security Force members, and perhaps 65,000 Iraqi civilians have died, the U.S. really controls only the International Green Zone, the 10 or so square kilometers in downtown Baghdad that contain the U.S. Embassy and the Iraqi seat of government—and even the Green Zone is attacked daily by mortar and rocket fire.<sup>42</sup> The fact is that neither the U.S. nor the Iraqi Government that



it sponsors currently controls Iraq's streets, except temporarily and with a heavy show of force such as occurred during Senator John McCain's April 2007 walk through a Baghdad market. It should be noted that the difficulties the U.S.-led coalition has encountered have occurred in Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle, where the terrain is mostly flat and should be relatively easy to control.

In contrast, defeating Iran would be many degrees harder. To begin with, Iran is four times larger than Iraq, with three times as many people. Just occupying Iran would require a force much larger than the one the U.S. used against Saddam. Where would the additional forces come from, and what would happen in Iraq when the U.S. forces deployed to Iran? Also, to reach Tehran, U.S. forces would have to negotiate a vast expanse of terrain characterized by tall mountains, deep valleys, and high, dry deserts. Tehran, with 10 million people, would be an urban combat nightmare when compared to the much smaller Baghdad. In the present circumstances, is the military option of invading and occupying Iran really a viable one for the United States?

The other frequently discussed military option involves so-called surgical strikes by bombers or missiles against suspected nuclear facilities in Tehran, Natanz, Isfahan, and elsewhere. As noted earlier, though, these strikes would face some serious challenges. Iran's nuclear program is dispersed among at least 50 cities in deep, hardened bunkers on heavily guarded facilities. And, because the nuclear program is mostly homegrown, Iran has the indigenous ability to reconstitute any of the program's key parts should there be a successful attack against a facility.

There are other factors to consider, too. For one, history shows that even the most successful aerial bombardment almost always produces innocent casualties, thereby triggering near-automatic national outrage and international condemnation. This should be a key factor in calculating the total risks of executing so-called surgical attacks because, surprisingly to some, the great majority of Iranians actually admire the U.S. (Iran is arguably the least anti-American country in the Persian Gulf.) Would Washington want to risk permanently alienating the entire Iranian population by conducting military attacks which have a minimal probability of success? In addition, President Ahmadinejad has

succeeded in making the nuclear issue a matter of national sovereignty and pride. No matter how successful a strike is, neither of these will be destroyed; in fact, an attack could easily foster greater support for Ahmadinejad and stoke a nationalistic determination to defy the U.S. by increasing efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

The bottom line is that the chance of eliminating Iran's nuclear capability by some kind of surgical strike is, at best, very slim. Moreover, even if such attacks were to succeed, they would only delay Iran's nuclear bid, not end it.

Clearly, previous American-led economic, military, and political sanctions against the IRI have succeeded in only one thing: they have diminished any economic, technical, and political leverage that the U.S. might have had over Iran. Having isolated Iran and forced it to operate independently, American policy makers now have no effective options except the most draconian for altering Iranian behavior.

In contrast to the U.S., and despite challenges in its own relationship with Iran, the European Union has chosen to carry on "the Dialogue" with Tehran. As a result, it has had significantly more success than the U.S. in gaining concessions and agreements on issues of mutual interest. Still, the Europeans cannot offer the kind of security relationship that the Islamic Republic wants, especially in the Gulf and Caspian Sea areas; only the world's single superpower can do that. Thus, while the U.S. might not have the heavy-handed leverage it wants over Iran, it does have something that Tehran wants. To strike a deal, though, the U.S. will have to agree to negotiate on an equal basis, without any preconditions.

## **Future Prospects, Current Prescriptions**

So far, this discussion of U.S.-Iranian relations has been pretty gloomy. The prospects for the future, however, are not really so depressing. Are Iran and the U.S. on a collision course? Not necessarily, since each side has many cards yet to play.

As mentioned earlier, the greatest impediment to improved relations between the two nations is not necessarily Iran's pursuit of nuclear power, as Washington's countenancing of Pakistan's program suggests. Rather, the main problem is that the U.S. doesn't understand the leadership, government, and society that have developed in Iran since the 1979

revolution. Lacking familiarity, U.S. policy makers are in the dark about Tehran's true intentions, and being in the dark, they assume the worst.

It is broadly understood that the best way to gauge intentions is to interact extensively with the opposing side. Unfortunately, the U.S. has long relied on technology to answer its intelligence questions. Satellite imagery, computer models, airborne eavesdropping, and similar means of high-tech data collection cannot even give us a clear picture of the other side's capabilities (for example, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or Iranian nuclear technology), much less divine the human intentions behind those capabilities. The logical resolution to the U.S.-Iran's impasse is for U.S. leaders to engage with Iran leaders person to person. Toward that end, there are several meaningful steps Washington could take.

**Practice listening.** To lay the groundwork for effective approaches, U.S. leaders first need to understand why the IRI operates as it does; and to do this, they must respect Iran's leaders at least enough to consider that their motives might issue from something other than what President Bush's speechwriter simplistically interpreted as "evil." Moving from dogmatic assertion to pragmatic analysis will take political courage, but doing so is vital if the U.S. is to properly assess Iran's intentions—nuclear or otherwise.

Unfortunately, many American leaders have made the Iranian challenge even more formidable by listening only to those who tell them what they want to hear. For example, U.S. leaders still tend to publicly depict Iran as seething with a revolutionary fervor that threatens to spill out over the Middle East and the world, and that has only been held in check by Western containment policies. But those who truly listen and observe know that Iran's revolutionary message is and always has been exclusively relevant to Shi'a Muslims—and is naturally contained because the Middle East is predominantly Sunni and the Shi'a message has little general appeal to the rest of the world. Moreover, if U.S. leaders had listened to those with networks of personal contacts in Iran, they would have learned that revolutionary fervor has waned dramatically among the majority of Iranian citizens and even among many of the mullahs, who have long been more focused on finding pragmatic solutions to the domestic problems facing Iranian society.

Unfortunately, the U.S. continues to display a consistent pattern of diplomatic obtuseness and disrespect toward Iran, with U.S. leaders petulantly refusing to listen to what Iranian leaders have to say. Washington snubs direct discussion with Tehran, relying only on diplomatic third parties for mediations. It dismisses Tehran's messages because they are too long, but then regards diplomatic signals as meaningless or misguided.

Because the U.S. will not communicate with Iran, it depends mainly on high-tech information collection for the bulk of information it uses to "understand" its counterpart. But to actually comprehend Iranian perspectives, fears, and intentions, the U.S. will have to greatly deemphasize its reliance on high-tech surveillance and collection and return to human-to-human engagement. Contrary to its largely unjustified faith in technology's ability to solve essentially human relations problems, the U.S. will not be able to deal effectively with the IRI challenge by poring over sophisticated satellite pictures, by depending on computer models, or by relying on other electronic means of collection. High-tech data-gathering tools merely show, at best, other technical capabilities while telling us nothing at all about the real human intention behind such capabilities. Even the most sophisticated technology is no substitute for good old-fashioned human-to-human contact and the information and relevant insights that are gleaned by such contact.

That U.S. faith in high-tech approaches to developing strategic intelligence is badly misplaced should already be obvious, thanks to several recent experiences in which policy makers were seriously misled about other nations' intentions and capabilities. For example, massive technological surveillance did not help the U.S. foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union, failed to reveal the true extent of Indian nuclear weapons technology development until a weapon was actually tested, and did not preclude the U.S. Government from grossly overestimating the likelihood of Saddam Hussein actually possessing and using weapons of mass destruction. Even at this writing, no one in the high-tech collection business can provide U.S. policy makers with an absolutely reliable answer as to whether North Korea did or did not detonate a nuclear weapon—though the assumption that it did sent shudders through the corridors of power in Washington which continue to reverberate.

Despite numerous such examples illustrating how an over-reliance on high-tech information collection can produce serious, and in some cases tragic, foreign policy, successive U.S. leaders and their administrations have depended principally on technology for insight into the intentions and mindset of Iran. They have failed to leverage human collection capabilities and have not taken advantage of opportunities provided by regional or global developments. One major adverse consequence of this policy approach is that Iranian intentions remain a mystery to the U.S. administration.

**Seek opportunities to engage.** Had Washington taken a more commonsensical approach and engaged Tehran earlier, the two governments might now be sharing mutual regional security concerns. Such engagement may have precluded the current nuclear standoff. But instead, Iranian policies are issues of concern for the U.S. The essential question is, How do those who have concern about Iranian actions get Iran to change its objectives and behavior?

Washington policy makers need to reverse their approach by inviting the IRI's leaders to sit down and discuss the issues confronting them, especially those that seem to be impelling the U.S. and Iran toward a preventable war. No doubt some irreconcilable differences would remain, but if U.S. leaders were to deal directly and respectfully with Iran, they would be more likely to understand the justifications for Iran's policies and could then work toward viable solutions.

The two nations have common interests. Regional security is probably the most pressing of these. The U.S. needs to open a dialogue with Iran regarding American security guarantees that would benefit both parties. In the short run, this might lead to broader cooperation on Iraq and an agreement to clamp down on terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. But in the long run, it could serve as a means of influencing demographic, economic, and political developments in Iran, where an overwhelmingly young population with access to the Internet, satellite TV, and Hollywood productions can be easily influenced by subtle pro-Western ideals and messages about the globalization process.

Another common interest is trade. Iran is a major exporter of oil to the industrial societies of the West and a potential major consumer of U.S. products. Less tension in the region would translate into

The Islamic revolution is today a spent force in Iran, and the Islamic Republic is a tired dictatorship facing pressures to change. The victory of hard-line candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election cannot conceal the reality that grassroots concerns about democracy and economic reform are the key defining factors in Iranian politics as a whole today. Iranian society often appears to be gripped by contradictions: a theocracy coexists with limited democratic practices; a secularized middle-class youth culture shares the public sphere with a sizable share of the populace that still puts its trust in Khomeini and his legacy. Daily newspapers run full-page discussions of debates between French philosophers over the meaning of "postmodernist discourse," yet the country continues to languish under the Islamic Republic. The pull of modernity and reformism is strong, but so is that of tradition and conservatism. Despite the influence of the latter two forces, however, Iran more than any other society in the Muslim world is a place where fundamentals are under scrutiny and open to questioning and new thinking.

—*Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr<sup>43</sup>

cheaper energy bills for the American citizen. On the other side, Iranians have a real appetite for U.S. products. American industries can directly benefit from exporting non-military items to an Iranian market of 75 million consumers. Exchanges of this kind inevitably lead to interdependence that evolves into vested mutual interests, giving both parties a reason to maintain their relationship.

In addition to security and trade, restoring contact in the educational, technological, and military fields should be considered based on the mutual benefits derived from such engagements.

**Conduct role-playing exercises.** Finally, a good way to gain knowledge of Iran and promote better relations with its leaders would be to conduct high-level role-playing exercises involving representatives of both governments. The best way to understand the behavior of others is to determine what others see, how

they see it, and how they might respond to what they see based on their perceived interests. Role-playing exercises can facilitate all of this. Done honestly and accurately, and with consideration given to the basic principles of the Golden Rules, they can contribute significantly to an understanding of each other's concerns and national aspirations.

In the end, whether it happens by role-playing, or through incremental exchanges of contacts, or

even as the result of some dramatic breakthrough similar to Nixon's visit to China, an improved U.S.-IRI relationship would greatly lessen the tension in the world. It could shorten the conflict in Iraq, keep both sides from precipitating a debacle in Iraq, and perhaps prevent an all-out conflagration in the Middle East and Europe. The possible payoffs are enormous; the outlay—listen, respect, reconsider, engage—a relative pittance. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Ali Asghar Soltanieh (Iranian Representative to IAEA), "Iranian Nuclear Activities & International Policies (in Farsi)," *Journal of Foreign Policy* (Iranian Foreign Ministry) 19 (Fall & Winter 2006): 609-28.

2. See Amir Hossein Hosseini (Policy Analyst at The Institute for Political & International Studies), "Current U.S. Strategy on Confronting WMD & Iran's Nuclear Program (in Farsi)," *Journal of Foreign Policy* (Iranian Foreign Ministry) 19 (fall & winter 2006): 493-538; see also Seyed Hossein Sadat Meydani (Policy Analyst at Iranian Foreign Ministry), "The Security Council & Iran's Nuclear Case: Governance of International Law in Confrontation with International Peace (in Farsi)," *Journal of Foreign Policy* (Iranian Foreign Ministry) (spring 2006): 1-31.

3. Anonymous Revolutionary Guard officer, conversation with author, August 2006, Tehran.

4. On this topic, see Jo-Anne Hart, "Perceptions and Courses of Actions toward Iran," *Military Review* (September-October 2005): 9-21.

5. The Iranian perspectives presented here are the results of a series of informal conversations, interviews, and discussions the author held with Iranian officials and scholars both inside and outside the country, mainly since 2000. They wish to remain anonymous.

6. See Houman A. Sadri, *Revolutionary States: Leaders and Foreign Relations* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997) and see also R.K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran 1500-1941* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1966).

7. William Morgan Shuster American lawyer, civil servant, and publisher, is best known as the treasurer-general of Persia by appointment of the Iranian parliament, or Majlis, from May to December 1911. Shuster was forced out of Persia by Britain and Russia, and returned to the United States to write *The Strangling of Persia*, a scathing indictment of Russian and British meddling in the affairs of Persia.

8. For an extensive analysis of repression during the Shah era, see Reza Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

9. Iranian students and immigrants to the U.S. in the 1970s and early 1980s, interviews by author, 1981-83, Los Angeles, CA, and Washington, D.C.

10. Sepehr Zabih, *The Mossadegh Era: Roots of the Iranian Revolution* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1982).

11. For accurate and comprehensive views of Ayatollah Khomeini, see *Shah-e-Nur* [in Farsi], 19 volumes, (Tehran) Sazman Madarik Farhangi Inqilab Islami Vabasteh Bih Vizarat Farhang va Irshad Islami, 1986.

12. Anonymous member of Iranian President Mehdi Bazargan's cabinet, interview by author, 1985, Tehran.

13. See "List of Attacks on U.S. Embassies" *International Herald Tribune*, 19 May 2007, <www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/05/19/america/NA-GEN-U.S.-Embassy-Attacks.php>.

14. Author, private conversation with five Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guard) officers, summer 2003, Bandar Abbas and Abadan on the Persian Gulf coast. For corroboration, see George C. Wilson, "Navy Missile Downs Iranian Jetliner," *Washington Post*, 4 July 1988, A01, <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inat/longterm/flight801/stories/july88crash.htm>.

15. For pragmatic signals of this group of leaders even during the first decade of IRI, see *Dar Maktab-e Jome'h* (in Farsi), 4 Volumes, (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, summer 1988).

16. The author has seen such public symbols in Tehran, Isfahan, and Khoramshahr, to name a few cities.

17. From a political culture perspective, Iranian literature has many such epic stories in Poet Ferdosi's masterpiece work, *Shahnameh*.

18. Houman A. Sadri, "An Islamic Perspective of Non-Alignment," *Journal of Third World Studies* 16, no. 2 (fall 1999). See also Sadri, "Non-Alignment as a Foreign Policy Strategy: Dead or Alive," *Mediterranean Quarterly* (spring 1999).

19. Anonymous former member of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's cabinet, interview by author, 1993, Tehran. Interestingly enough, the interviewee mainly emphasized the cultural and historical (as opposed to religious) dimensions of Iran's anti-hegemonic stand.

20. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise & Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

21. An Iranian merchant and former Ministry of Trade official commented in an interview with me that the 6 percent growth rate is a major improvement over the early days of the Islamic Revolution, when the growth rate was negative. Interviewee wished to remain anonymous, interview by author, 1999 and 2005, Beverly Hills, California.

22. Vali Nasr, *Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 180.

23. In another of the Beverly Hills interviews (note 21), a Majlis member suggested to me that revolutionary Iran had borrowed a number of American democracy principles, including the notion of checks and balances and decentralization of power.

24. Bahman Bakhtiar, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996).

25. Claim based on three interviews conducted in Kuwait with a Kuwaiti National Assembly Representative, Dr. Hasan Johar, in May 2001, October 2002, and February 2003. Dr. Johar claimed that Kuwait had the only Parliament among Arab states of the Gulf and one of the most open parliaments in the entire Arab world. However, even the Kuwaiti Assembly is not as effective as its Iranian counterpart.

26. Assertions based on comments by former Iranian military personnel in the regular army and air force, 1997, 1999, and 2001, Tehran. Conversations with some former Iranian military officials who immigrated to the U.S. have confirmed the above comments.

27. Anonymous regular and revolutionary military leaders, interviews and conversations with author, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2006, Tehran, Isfahan, and Ahvaz.

28. According to its constitution, the IRI cannot initiate aggressive behavior, although it reserves the right to support oppressed people anywhere in the world. These comments are based on the author's interview with a retired Iranian judge, July 1997, near Los Angeles, CA.

29. Claim based on conversations and discussions with scholars at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), a think tank associated with the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2001, 2003, and 2006.

30. Author's conversations with scholars from the University of Tehran and University of Shahid Beheshti, February 2003 and August 2006.

31. For instance, Ray Takeyh argues that Iran naturally projects its power in the region and that the U.S. needs to consider such factors in its policy calculations. See Ray Takeyh, "Iran: Détente, Not Regime Change," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007): 17-28.

32. Conversations with a few Pasdaran officials in Tehran, Isfahan, and Ahvaz, July 2006.

33. Based on author's conversations with Professor Mehdi Al Salman, 2003, Kuwait.

34. Comment made at "The Sixth Biennial of Iranian Studies," an international conference for Iranian affairs experts organized by the International Society of Iranian Studies, 3-5 August 2006, School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), London School of Economics, London, UK.

35. Comments made to the author at a reception honoring Ambassador Muhammad Javad Zarif, the new Iranian Ambassador to the UN, January 2007.

36. Hart, 9.

37. Nasr, 251.

38. This is a major change, since tension was usually high on the border during Taliban rule. In fact, after the Taliban captured Herat in September 1998 and executed nine Iranian diplomats and a journalist at the Iranian Consulate, Iran almost declared war. Later, the tension subsided due to UN intervention. For a report, see <www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/1998/09/980914-afghan.htm>.

39. "Iran a Friendly, Brotherly Neighbor of Afghanistan: Karzai," *Beijing Times*, 25 February 2002, <http://english.people.com.cn/200202/25/eng20020225\_90916.shtml>.

40. Based on conversations with Iranian diplomats in Arab Persian Gulf states, 2002-2003.

41. Iranian policy analysts consider "the U.S. Jewish lobby" and "the Christian right" as major sources of the American hawkish attitude toward Iran. For example, see Seyed Ali Tabatabaie, (Political Science Faculty, Free University of Tehran), "The U.S. Jewish Lobby, Instigators of Iran Sanctions (in Farsi)," *Journal of Foreign Policy* (Iranian Foreign Ministry) 20 (Spring 2006): 33-84. Also see: Mohammad Jamschidi (Political Science Senior Policy Analyst, Imam Sadegh University), "Christian Right & the U.S. Foreign Policy (in Farsi)," *Journal of Foreign Policy* (Iranian Foreign Ministry) 20 (Spring 2006): 85-121.

42. Iraq casualty counts for coalition forces and contractors can be found at <http://icasualties.org/oif/>. The number of Iraqi civilian fatalities can be found at <www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>. The statistic given in the article only includes media-reported civilian deaths that are related in some way to military action or response to such action (i.e. insurgent attacks). Not even the Green Zone is completely safe, as the 12 April 2007 bombing in the Iraqi Parliament cafeteria indicates. See "Suicide attack kills 8 in Iraqi parliament cafeteria," <www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/04/12/iraq.main/index.html>.

43. Nasr, 213.