

## The Middle East Security: Iran and America

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### *Introduction*

The United States and Iran severed their diplomatic relations in 1979, and mutual misconceptions, profound mistrust, clash of cultures, and the factor of Israel have marred this relationship for the last four decades. The relationships between these two countries continue to deteriorate, inching closer to the danger zone. What is rare about this relationship is that the two states have been locked in a state of non-communication for over four decades. In other words, the two governments simply cannot or do not talk directly with each other. This condition was not seen even during the Cold War between the U.S. and its adversaries. The U.S. not only had diplomatic, but also economic relations with the communist bloc.

Sanctions and isolation of Iran has become Washington's strategy since 1990s. The United States has relied on economic embargos, U.N. resolutions and strident military threats against Iran with no positive results. In fact, the Western sanctions have resulted in deterioration of the Iranian economy, which in turn led to adoption of more radical foreign policy options by the Iranian regime. Yet many in Washington advocate the same policy toward Iran. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in March 2009 that sanctions were preferable to diplomacy in pressuring Iran (Pentagon Brief, March 2009). Many others have urged and succeeded in persuading U.S. administrations to adopt ever-tougher sanctions if Iran does not bend to U.S. demands.

This paper attempts to (1) trace the sources of enmity between Iran and the U.S.; (2) review Iran's nuclear program and its dealing with International Atomic Energy Agency; (3) underline the grave consequences of war between Iran and the U.S.; (4) try to delve into the question of why the U.S. and Iran should initiate a new approach to resolve their outstanding differences to pursue their common interest. Regardless of the reasons for America's strained ties with Iran, there is a grave need for gradual increase in cooperation between these two countries in which Iran and the United States should focus on their shared interests as a basis for a co-evolutionary process of rapprochement. In the post 9/11 era, there is an unprecedented zone of shared and parallel interests between Iran and the United States, warranting their engagement with each other on Afghanistan, where Iran played a helpful role prior to U.S. invasion, Iraq, as well as such issues as energy security, regional security, narcotics and the twin threats of Taliban and Sunni terrorism presently threatening the stability of Iran's nuclear neighbor to the east, Pakistan.

### *The Sources of Enmity*

Both governments in the United States and Iran believe that the other's government represents a real threat to its national security. The origins of this enmity are several. For Iranians, this tension dates to the early 1950s, when a coup engineered by the United States and Britain brought down Iran's first democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and replaced it with a brutal dictatorship of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi that lasted nearly three decades. The coup, which was engineered by CIA and British because of the Mossadegh' nationalization of Anglo-Iranian oil company, derailed the Iranian democratic movement. After the coup, the Shah turned over most of the country's oil production to foreign firms. U.S. oil companies ended up taking a 50 percent share of Iranian oil production while Anglo-Iranian Oil got only 40 percent (Erlich, 2007). The United States had backed the dictatorial Shah for twenty-six years, and then after his overthrow, President Carter allowed the Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment. Iranians feared the United States was planning to return the Shah to power as it had done in 1953.

The pattern of hostility between these two countries continued and was reinforced by the Reagan Administration's support for Saddam Hussein during his bloody eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s; an attack on Iran's passenger airline carrying Iran Air Flight No. 655 by the USS Vincennes over the Persian Gulf on July 3, 1988, and mounting threats against Iran by the U.S. following 9/11 terror attacks, including the introduction of Tehran as part of the "Axis of Evil." Adding to the Strain from the U.S. perspective are the violent action and incarceration of the U.S. diplomats for 444 days which followed the Iranian revolution, the post-revolutionary Iranian government's inflammatory rhetoric questioning the legitimacy of both the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, and of the U.S. sponsored Middle East peace process; the attempts of the post-revolutionary Iranian government to subvert Arab Persian Gulf regimes with whom the U.S. enjoys cordial and economically important relations; and the undisguised intentions of Iran to complicate U.S. access to the Persian Gulf oil.

Following the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis, the U.S. policy of isolating Iran politically and controlling its military buildup created a victimization complex in the Iranian political consciousness. The ongoing debate over Iranian plans to acquire a nuclear capability illustrates this point. By denouncing Iran as part of an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address in January 2002, President Bush closed any possibility of reaching a political settlement with Iran and began its campaign for regime change. The Bush administration regularly reminded Iran that "all options remain on the table," including possible military attacks.

Although there are fundamental differences between Iran and the United States, we should not close our eyes to shared interests. Among the goals the United States and Iran share are bringing peace, security, and stability to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; bringing security to the Persian Gulf, and combating the terrorism and radicalism that stem from the extreme version of Sunni Islam. Iranian and U.S. officials should address these concerns and explain that better relations would lead to increased regional stability, economic development, progress in the fight against narco-trafficking, successful efforts to address ideological extremism, and a more secure oil flow. Just as the United States reached out to Iran regarding Afghanistan, both sides can build on shared interests in any of these areas. Furthermore, cultural ties run deep despite the long-standing tension between these two countries. American universities have historically been a destination for Iranians and are today home to Iranian academics in numerous fields. Among Americans, there is an appreciation for Persian and Islamic culture coming from Iranian civilization that demonstrates itself in their respect for Persian art, music, and literature such as Rumi's poetry.

### ***Nuclear Issue***

Tehran's nuclear program has become the most significant source of friction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, especially the United States. This section endeavors to shed some light on the history of Iran's nuclear program.

Iran's efforts to develop nuclear energy dates to 1956, when Mohammad Reza Shah's government initiated a series of talks with the government of the United States, culminating in the 1957 signing of the first agreement between the two countries on the peaceful use of nuclear energy by Iran (Afkhami, 1997). One year later, the two countries announced a "proposed agreement for cooperation in research in the peaceful use of atomic energy" under the auspices of Eisenhower's Atomic for Peace Program. That same year, the Institute of Nuclear Sciences, affiliated with the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), was relocated from Baghdad to Tehran University. Two years after the agreement was made public, Shah ordered the establishment of the first atomic research center at Tehran University and negotiated with the United States to supply a five-megawatt reactor. Over the next two decades, the United States and Canada provided nuclear fuel, equipment, and training Iran needed to start its research (Afkhami, 1997). On July 1, 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) on the day it opened for signature. Iran completed its Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) six years later.

In 1972, regional wars and predictions of a looming energy shortfall prompted the Shah's government to complete a significant study on Iran's future energy needs. A major finding was that Iran would need alternative energy sources to meet its needs in the next two decades. The quadrupling of oil prices in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war allowed the Shah to order the construction of twenty 300-megawatt nuclear power plants at the cost of \$60 billion. France's Framatome, Germany's Kraftwerk Union (KWU), and Siemens joined the United States in assisting the Iranian nuclear program. They helped Iran construct nuclear plants and supplied them with nuclear fuel.

President Ford offered the Shah a complete nuclear cycle in 1976. The Ford team, including many senior officials in the Bush administration, reportedly approved the deal for a full nuclear fuel cycle. U.S. companies offered atomic reactors capable of regenerating fissile materials on a self-sustaining basis to the Shah's government for sale, albeit without the uranium enrichment capabilities sought by Tehran today (Linzer, 2005).

It is debatable whether the Shah wanted to make Iran a nuclear-weapon-capable state, but there were indications that some were suspicious of his ultimate motives. The U.S. Special National Intelligence Estimate (PDF) and the Soviet intelligence had concluded that the Shah planned to make Iran a member of the atomic club and build nuclear bombs because he did not wish to be outdone by countries like Israel and India (Amirie, 2007). The Shah's purported desire to turn Iran into a nuclear weapons state may have had its genesis in the monarch's fear of the destabilizing impact of the Soviet-supported states in the region. According to the Shah, "Iran did not fear from the Soviet Union, but rather from Afghanistan and Iraq acting as proxies for Soviet aggression. The Shah told President Eisenhower to counter this threat that Iran needed a 'crash program' to obtain highly mobile forces with atomic weapons." (Keefer, 1993).

The withdrawal of Western support after the Islamic Revolution slowed Iran's nuclear progress. Subsequently, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 led to the destruction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant that had been in its rudimentary stages of construction by the German firms.

A combination of several factors—opposition to nuclear technology by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the departure of nuclear scientists sent Iran's nuclear program into a tailspin. By 1987, for unclear reasons, the wartime prime minister, Mousavi, decided to restart the project. The unfinished plant, however, had been badly damaged by Iraqi bombardment, and Germany declined to resume the work or even supply the original blueprints. Tehran then approached Moscow for help. In 1995, the Russians agreed to pick up where Germany left off, signing a contract with Iran to complete two 950-megawatt light-water reactors at Bushehr. The Russian deal called for supplying the Bushehr plant with nuclear fuel for ten years and required Iran to allow the IAEA to monitor and observe the safeguards protocol. This plant was completed in 2011.

After the resumption of nuclear development in the late 1980s, the Islamic Republic's top leadership openly and unequivocally stated that Iran's sole objective was to enrich uranium at low levels to obtain fuel for its nuclear power plant. Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and ex-presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami reiterated that atomic weapons were against Iran's political and economic interests and Islamic beliefs. Ayatollah Khamenei said: "The Iranian nation has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons...Iran is not after nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin and believes the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive and dangerous." (Ignatius, 2012). President Ahmadinejad, in his turn, has added that "a cultured, learned, rational, and civilized" nation such as Iran "does not need nuclear weapon; only those who want to solve all problems by force do." (BBC News, 2006). Washington, however, has insisted that Iran's peaceful program is a cover for the ultimate development of nuclear weapons and a threat to its interests in the region as well as Israel's security and survival (Zarif, 2006).

Over the years, the Iranian government built a vast network of uranium mines, enrichment sites, and research reactors to provide its plants with domestically produced fuel. In August 2002, secret Iranian fuel cycle activities in Natanz, 150 miles Southwest of Tehran, were publicly revealed, fundamentally changing the diplomatic landscape. Satellite photographs in December 2002 subsequently confirmed the existence of the site. The plant was constructed in 2001 to accommodate fifty thousand centrifuges, allowing Iran to produce massive quantities of enriched uranium. From then on, Britain, France, and Germany (the EU3) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began to play much more significant roles in the diplomatic effort to address the problem. To assuage suspicions about Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tehran invited IAEA inspectors in February 2003 to examine all nuclear facilities for an extended period. In late 2003, the EU3 persuaded the government of President Mohammad Khatami to suspend its enrichment program and accept the NPT additional protocol (Cordesman, Al-Rodhan, 2006). The EU3's agreement with the Iranian government collapsed after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. On September 24, 2005, the IAEA board of governors found Iran violating the NPT and voted to report it to the Security Council of the United Nations, ending Tehran's relentless efforts to prevent such a move. The resolution cited "the absence of confidence" that Iran's program was exclusively for peaceful purposes. An IAEA report issued at the end of January 2006 found evidence suggesting a link between Iran's officially peaceful nuclear research program and its military work on high explosives and missiles under a so-called "Green Salt Project" (Sciolino & Broad, 2006). The report was the first such declaration by the agency, which had repeatedly refused to back Washington's claim that at least some of Iran's nuclear activities were linked to military projects.

In 2009, the government of Iran disclosed to the IAEA the existence of a new uranium enrichment facility at Fordow, outside Qom; the facility had already been detected by Western intelligence. The IAEA believes the facility aims to enrich uranium beyond the 5 percent U-235 concentration achieved at Natanz. It is undergoing construction designed to expand its capacity to accommodate more than three thousand centrifuges.

Iran's nuclear program is one of the most polarizing issues in one of the world's most volatile regions. While American spy agencies have believed that the Iranians halted efforts to build a nuclear bomb back in 2003, suspicion about the intention of the Iranian government lingers. Since 2007, U.S. intelligence services have asserted that no evidence suggests that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has made the final decision to construct nuclear weapons. Still, he is accumulating the necessary resources and technologies that will provide him with that option. "They are certainly moving on that path, but we don't believe that they have actually decided to go ahead with nuclear weapons," stressed James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, in his testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2012 (Risen & Mazzetti, 2012). Publicly and privately, American intelligence officials express confidence in spy agencies' assertions (Risen, 2012). Still, suspicion about Iran's nuclear ambitions has provoked devastating economic sanctions by the Western countries against Iran.

On February 24, 2012, the report by the IAEA indicated that for the first time, Iran had begun producing fuel inside the new facility in a mountain near the holy city of Qum. The agency's inspectors found in their visits over the past three months that Iran has tripled its production capacity for a type of fuel far closer to what is needed to make a core of the nuclear weapon. The IAEA, however, continues to verify the non-diversion of the declared nuclear materials, and the IAEA has not determined that Iran violates NTP.

Despite the IAEA report, Ayatollah Khamenei, who has the final authority on Iran's Foreign policy, has indicated his opposition to nuclear weapons. He has also issued a fatwa, an Islamic edict, against the acquisition of a nuclear bomb in Iran (Risen, 2012). The Obama administration, relying on a top-priority intelligence collection program, has concluded that Iranian leaders have not decided whether to construct a nuclear weapon actively. They also had confidence that any Iranian move toward building a functional atomic weapon would be detected long before a bomb was made.

Barak Obama seemed to recognize it was time for a different approach and made clear that his administration was in the business of diplomacy. In 2014-2015, The U.S. and its Western allies plunged into unprecedented, around-the-clock negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program. In July 2015, a historic agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) was reached between Iran and six world powers, the so-called P5+1 to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Although this agreement is a 159-page complex document, its basic terms were relatively straightforward. Iran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment to a maximum of 3.67 percent, sufficient for civilian nuclear power but not enough for nuclear weapons. It also agreed to reduce its centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium, by two-thirds. This meant Iran would only have 5,060 centrifuges compared to the 19,000 it had before the agreement. It also agreed to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98 percent, from 10,000 kilograms to 300 kilograms, and to allow highly stringent, around-the-clock IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities to ensure compliance. In exchange, the P5+1 Agreed to gradually lift some of its sanctions against Iran—but kept in place its snapback mechanism, whereby sanctions could be quickly reimposed if any member of the P5+1 was concerned that Iran was not meeting its obligations (Ghazvinian, 2021).

The nuclear deal with Iran proved that multilateral diplomacy could resolve even the most demanding challenges posed by Tehran. However, the deal's critics believed the agreement represented an unthinkable capitulation, and Republicans accused the Obama administration of appeasement (Sadjadpour, 2022). In 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the deal and adopted a strategy of "Maximum Pressure." Faced with severe economic sanctions in its history, Iran, during 2019 and 2020, gradually suspended various aspects of its cooperation with JCOPA and violated many of the agreement's tenets (Ghazvinian, 2022).

The Biden administration sought to undo Trump's action, but its efforts to resurrect the JCPOA quickly ran into trouble. Tehran refused to engage directly with the United States diplomats, forcing Washington to negotiate through its European partners. Iran insisted that the Biden administration guarantees that no future president could withdraw from the agreement, a requirement that Biden had no power to fulfill. The original nuclear deal depended on Western cooperation with Moscow, which could nudge, cajole, and occasionally extort Tehran to come to terms with the West. Then came Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, upending the international ecosystem in which the deal had survived. An anti-government uprising in Iran centered on women's rights and civil freedom, which was sparked on September 22 due to the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian in the custody of Iran's controversial morality police, further complicated making any deal with the Iranian government.

### ***Consequences of War***

Tensions are mounting daily between Iran and U.S. and between Iran and Israel over Iran's nuclear program. Both sides show no sign of compromise. The ruling hardliners in Iran believe that the suspension of the nuclear program, under coercion, would open the door to more demands of concessions by the West. The Grand Ayatollah Nasir Makarem Shirazi, a vital theologian close to Ayatollah Khamenei, once remarked: "Even if the nuclear issue is resolved, they (Foreign powers) will start making claims about human rights, freedom of press...we have to be careful and never accede to that demands" (Shirazi, 2009).

Israel consistently beats war drums against Iran, but the U.S. opposes this approach. Former U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, reinforced Washington's opposition to unilateral Israel military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. But what went almost unnoticed was that his objection merely reflected a fear that the "international coalition" applying pressure on Iran "could be undone if Iran was attacked prematurely" (Norton-Taylor, 2012). Even in the absence of a planned war, the ever-increasing potential exists that rising tensions might prompt a miscalculation by either or both sides. An international relations expert maintains that "war is most likely if you overestimate other's hostility but underestimate their capabilities. War can occur without misperception, but rarely (Jarvis, 1988).

The consequences of such a war would be devastating. On September 13, 2012, a new paper titled "Weighing the Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran" was released and signed by over thirty senior security experts of the United States from the high ranks of elected office, military, and diplomatic branches. Among the signatories were well-known names such as newly appointed Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, former Deputy Secretaries of State John Whitehead and Richard Armitag, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Paul Volcker, former Commander in Chief of the United States Central Command Anthony Zinni, and William Fallon, retired United States Navy four-star admiral. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the consequences of an American military strike against Iran, its nuclear program, and the outcomes of such a campaign.

The paper concludes that "extended military strikes by the U.S. alone or in concert with Israel could destroy or severely damage the six most important known nuclear facilities in Iran, setting back Iran's nuclear program for up to four years." If the objective is to ensure that Iran never acquires a nuclear bomb, "the U.S. needs to conduct a significantly expanded air and sea war over a prolonged period, likely several years" (Long & Luers, 2012). The signatories conclude that military attacks against Iran would have severe costs to U.S. interests and be felt over the long term, with problematic consequences for global and regional stability, including economic stability. They maintain that "A U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran could introduce destabilizing political and economic forces in a region already experiencing major transformations. In addition to costing the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars yearly, a sustained conflict would boost the price of oil and further disrupt an already fragile world economy" (Long & Luers, 2012).

It is naïve to underestimate the consequences of a war with Iran. Global economic crisis would likely result from another war in the Middle East. A war with Iran could not only disrupt the global oil and natural gas markets but will, at a minimum, block the export of Iran's oil, resulting in a significant increase in petroleum prices. A paper released by the Federation of American Scientists in November 2012 concludes that "a full-scale military invasion is not only costly, it is also more likely to trigger many potentially cost-bearing effects to drive up their respective costs in dollar terms (Blair & Jansson, 2012).

Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. or Israel attacks Iranian nuclear facilities. Many American experts assert that Iran cannot close the Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 40 percent of the world's seaborne oil exports travel. Most likely, this is a valid assessment. However, what is ignored in this calculus is that keeping the Strait open is one thing, but keeping it safe and secure for uninterrupted oil flow is another. Former National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has warned that "a possible closure of the Strait by Iran, even not for a very long time, would prompt the cost of oil to skyrocket as the vital oil-shipping route would be a dangerous passage as a result of military conflict" (Brzezinski, 2012).

James Hamilton, an energy economist, has assessed four previous episodes in which geopolitical events led to oil supply disruptions. The four cases were the 1973 OPEC embargo, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, and the 1990 first Persian Gulf War. His findings demonstrate that "a recession followed each of these events in the United States." Hamilton's study also concludes that "at their pick disruptions, these events took out 4-7% of net world production and were associated with an oil price increase of 25-70% (Hamilton, 2010). There is little excess oil capacity in the world now; even minor disruptions could produce significant price changes. Hamilton believes a military confrontation with Iran could have a spectacular price spike. If the Strait of Hormuz were to close, it would represent a shock to world production that, in percentage terms, would be three times as big as the 1973-74 OPEC embargo (Hamilton, 2012).

Some analysts argue that today because America's dependence on oil from the Persian Gulf has declined dramatically, the oil supply in this region is not a driving force behind grand strategy in the Middle East. This argument is flawed because any instability in oil supplies from the Gulf region affects oil prices throughout the global expanse. Thus, the economy of the U.S. According to Robert B. Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, today speculators account for 64 percent of all oil contracts (Reich, 2012). So, not just the supply and demand dynamics control the market. Upon any uncertain outlook of diminished supply, speculation dominates the market.

The U.S. military forces can destroy Iran, but the war has the potential to damage the U.S. economy beyond repair. According to a comprehensive paper titled "the Gulf Military Balance: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions," prepared by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, apart from inflicting losses on U.S. forces or those of U.S. regional allies and damaging critical infrastructures in the region, Iran can "disrupt or halt Gulf Commerce with little or no warning" (Cordesman, Gold & Bernstein, 2014). Whether or not the U.S. and Europe can avoid a great recession—if not depression—is highly questionable under a prolonged period of very high oil prices." As Iranian experts Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh note, if the U.S. attacks, Iran would likely retaliate. The Iranians could make the situation more miserable and deadly for U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan (Pollack & Takeyh, 2005).

The human cost of war on Iran would be devastating. According to a report prepared by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, just a strike on the Bushehr Nuclear Reactor "will cause the immediate death of thousands of people living adjacent to the site, and thousands of subsequent cancer deaths or even up to hundreds of thousands depending on the population density along the contamination plum" (Cordesman & Toukan, 2012).

A pre-emptive bombing against Iran's uranium factories would almost certainly require major US participation to be effective and would not be neat. Beyond the immediate casualties, it would carry grave costs: outraged Iranians rallying behind the regime that is now unpopular; Iran or its surrogates lashing out against America and Israeli targets in a long-term, low-intensity campaign of retaliation; a scorching hatred of America on the newly Arab street, generating new recruits for ISIS and its ilk; and ultimately oil shock to a fragile world economy; and the unraveling of the united front the U.S. has assembled to isolate Iran.

All that, and redoubled determination by Iran's leaders to do one thing that would prevent a future attack: rebuild the nuclear assembly line, only this time faster and deeper underground. As Carl Bildt and Erkki Tuomioja of the New York Times pointed out, "It is difficult to see a single action more likely to drive Iran into taking the final decision to acquire nuclear weapons than an attack on the country. And once such a decision was made, it would only be a matter of time before a nuclear Iran became a reality" (Bildt & Tuomioja, 2012). There is a broad consensus that, short of a full-scale invasion and occupation of Iran, a preventive attack would not end the nuclear program, only postpone it for a few years. As one report suggests:

Such an attack would likely embolden and enhance Iran's nuclear prospects in the long term. Without an Iranian weapon program, which IAEA inspectors have yet to find, a preemptive attack by the United States or Israel would provide Iran with the impetus and justification to pursue a full-blown covert nuclear deterrent program without the inconvenience of IAEA inspections. Such an attack would likely be seen as an act of aggression by Iran and most of the international community and only serve to weaken any current diplomatic coalition against Iran (Salma & Ruster, 2013).

### ***Negotiation:***

Iran and the United States need to be prepared to address each other's concerns. The U.S. approach toward Iran can be described as what one international expert calls "Coercive Diplomacy" (Jarvis, 2013). This approach is thus presented as a reasonable mix of incentives and disincentives, which puts the ball in Iran's court. Washington has used threats and promises to convince Iran to give up its nuclear program and end its continuing support for militant groups involved in various regional conflicts, including the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, Syria, and Yemen. But the dreary history of coercive diplomacy, according to Jarvis, "shows that all too often, threats and promises undercut, rather than complement, each other" (Jarvis, 2013). The United States administration have always maintained that 'all options are on the table'. The problem with coercive diplomacy is that if it fails, Washington might be pressured to follow a path it may not want to follow. When the United States suggests that it is willing to bomb Iran if it does not negotiate away its weapons program, the level of mistrust skyrockets and brings these two countries closer to military conflict. To date, however, the U.S. threat has heightened the perceived danger, increasing Iran's determination not to be swayed from its current course. Coercive diplomacy has failed to yield satisfactory results for forty years. Several scholars have persuasively presented the failure of this approach over several years, and events continue to prove them right (Amirahmadi & Shahidsaless, 2013). The carrot and stick policy ignores the immense values Iranians have always placed on their pride and prestige. The Islamic Republic has further exacerbated these Iranian nationalistic views toward its self-respect, particularly when the nation has been demonized and denigrated in the Western world and beyond.

Despite the deep political chasm that separates Iran and the United States, they have many common interests. The most essential shared interest between these two countries is the long-term security of the Middle East. As a regionally powerful state, Iran can help bring stability and keep America from being easily pulled into protracted, localized military commitments. Today, the Middle East remains crucial to American security concerns. The attack of September 11 and the subsequent war on terror have led policymakers to focus American strategy planning squarely on the Middle East while ignoring the rise of China as a potential superpower and Russia's renewed ambitions. Robert Gate and Zbigniew argue that "the strategic imperatives of the United States and Iran are by no means identical, nor are they often even harmonious, but they intersect in significant ways, particularly concerning the stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan. Regarding both these countries, the short-term needs and long-term visions of Washington and Tehran are surprisingly similar. However, they may differ profoundly on specifics, both the United States and Iran want post-conflict governments in Iraq and Afghanistan that respect the rights of their diverse citizens and live in peace with their neighbors" (Brzezinski & Gates, 2004).

The United States needs to have a broad-based strategic understanding with the Iranians. All those involved in establishing a relationship with Iran must be fortified against internal spoilers. The spoilers in both countries are lurking in the shadows of this or that nook of government, sometimes outspoken, sometimes much quietly determined to stop the process. John Trimman of MIT points out that instead of a hyper-cautious, incremental, carrot-and-sticks approach to Tehran, Washington should actively try to transform the relationship, much as Nixon changed relations with China and Reagan and Gorbachev transformed US-Soviet relations. Although these precedents are somewhat different from the situation the United States now faces with Iran, Trimman makes a strong case against incrementalism and for bold strategy. According to him:

Transforming the relationship means taking significant actions to alter the fundamental dynamics that have so long impeded progress or caused setbacks (Tirman, 2009). Naturally, one would like to see such actions coming from both sides, and eventually, this must be so. But in the coming year, the new approach can be adopted by the United States and put into practice. The risks of doing so are very low—Iran cannot hurt the United States significantly. The benefits, should Iran join us on this path, would be enormous: enhanced security for the region, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Israel; a new partner for the United States in a crucial part of the world; trade expansion; and an improvement more directly in American-Muslim relations worldwide.

Washington must convince Tehran that negotiations were not designed to weaken it and that a settlement would end American efforts at regime change. Security assurances would have to be part of any deal and be hard to craft. Most countries have strategic depth because of geography, conventional military forces, or alliances; Iran has none. Its borders are mostly land borders with countries that are hostile to it. It perceives all its fifteen neighbors as strategic problems. Iran's relationship with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas provides it with a strategic depth that it needs and does not have. Biden administration needs to get at Iran's national security dilemma and address it by providing security guarantees. The U.S. would commit itself not to seek to change the form of government or the borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its role in the region. The U.S. would accept a limited Iranian enrichment program and suspend sanctions that were imposed specifically in response to the nuclear program. The U.S. might also restore normal diplomatic relations with Iran—although taking that step and lifting sanctions might require a larger grand bargaining involving many other issues.

The United States may need to put more of its cards on the table to start an actual negotiation. It will have to convince Khamenei that successful negotiations would significantly reduce the threat to his country posed by the U.S. and that Washington would be willing to accept an appropriately safeguarded Iranian civilian nuclear program. According to Jarvis, there will be a strong temptation in Washington to reserve such inducements for the final stage of hard bargaining, but holding them back is likely to greatly decrease the chance that the negotiations will reach that stage at all (Jarvis, 1988).

No U.S. administration could give Iran those security guarantees if the Iranians continue to have ties to militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. The Iranian government needs to reconfigure its relationship with those groups. Iranians offered to discuss this in May 2003, but the Bush administration rejected their offer. The Iranians understand what the trade-off is. Today, we don't trust the Chinese completely; the Chinese don't completely trust us.

Similarly, the Iranians aren't trust us completely, and we won't trust them completely. However, the track record we have with the Iranians, dating back to the Iran-Contra scandal in 1985, is that, in each of the episodes in which we've pursued tactical cooperation, the Iranians were able to deliver most, not everything, but most of what we asked. In Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Iran played a critical role by siding with the United States and providing arms, supplies, and tactical advice to the Northern Alliance (Slavin, 2011). Washington's request for Iranian cooperation in the War on Terror also led to Iranian support in fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban in 2001 (Percy, 2009).

Regarding the nuclear program, Iran would be willing to agree to intrusive verification measures in exchange for Western Cooperation (Amanpour, 2012). Iran would agree to invasive verification measures that would make it virtually impossible for Tehran to start moving toward actual weaponization without the international community knowing very early, that the Iranians were beginning down that road. The Iranian leaders know well that if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, the pressure on any U.S. president to attack would be enormous and constant.

### **Concluding notes**

The U.S. policy of 'carrot-and-stick', sanctions, more sanctions, pressure, containment, and isolation of Iran has not achieved its objectives. Instead, it has radicalized the Iranian leadership. The policy of 'all options are on the table' has done nothing but exacerbate the crumbling relations between these two countries. If the current policy continues, it could erupt into an all-out war between these two countries, resulting in catastrophic results for both sides. A military attack against Iran risks igniting a period of confrontation across the region with consequences that no one can fully predict.

The U.S. needs a shift of paradigm. Washington's paradigm change would require strong engagement with the Iranian government. In the past, the United States and Iran have engaged in several diplomatic efforts to resolve their differences. Still, progress has been slow due to mutual mistrust and hardline stances on both sides. Sanctions have been imposed on Iran by the U.S., which have severely impacted the country's economy.

As Ghazvinian argues, "...nuclear issue cannot be dealt with in isolation from the larger political hostility between the United States and Iran. As long as US-Iranian relations remain mired in an untrusting, suspicious, dysfunctional paralysis, even a historic agreement over Iran's nuclear program is unlikely to alter the relationship meaningfully" (Ghazvinian, 2021).

The only way for the U.S. and Iran to reconcile their differences is through genuine dialogue and a willingness to let go of past convictions. This requires both sides to engage in a sincere effort to understand each other's concerns and priorities and to find common ground for cooperation.

There have been some positive signs of a thaw in US-Iran relations in recent years. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 was a significant step towards easing tensions between the two nations. Still, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and the subsequent reimposition of sanctions on Iran have stalled the progress.

Overall, a lasting solution to the US-Iran conflict can only be achieved through a sustained, unconditional, serious, and good-faith effort to build trust and find common ground through genuine dialogue and compromise. The other side could reciprocate an act of goodwill from one side and could be the start of something big.

The continuation of hostility will not serve the long-term interests of the U.S., nor will it promote regional or global stability. Dialogue and engagement are the only solutions to build bridges between the two countries to create peace and tranquility. The cooperation between Iran and the U.S. will remain a critical factor in restoring peace and stability in the region, particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen.

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