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Backed Into a Corner

Hey America, there's a pretty good reason why Iran doesn't trust you. Maybe it's time for a different approach.

BY HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN | APRIL 13, 2012



The Obama administration has done more to undermine Iran over the past three years than any U.S. presidency in the 33 years since the Iranian revolution. Under the shadow of a policy of "engagement," the United States and Israel have led a campaign of economic, cyber, and covert war against Iran. Yet this coercive approach, conducted along with sporadic negotiations on nuclear issues between Iran and the P5+1 group of China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States has failed to resolve the future of Iran's nuclear program.

The primary issue is mistrust. American and Western politicians continuously reiterate their mistrust of Tehran but seem not to understand that this mistrust is mutual. Iran has profound reasons to distrust the West. The United States and the Britain orchestrated the 1953 coup that removed Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, and installed a dictator, supporting him for a quarter century. Following the Iranian revolution, the West unilaterally withdrew from its contractual commitments and left Iran with billions of dollars of unfinished industrial and nuclear projects. In 1980, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran,

sparking an economically ruinous eight-year war in which Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran, and 300,000 Iranians lost their lives. The United States and the West supported the aggressor in that conflict. In 1988, the U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian civilian jetliner, killing 290 innocent civilians, including 66 children.

In 1989, during Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran welcomed a proposal by President George H.W. Bush -- encapsulated by Bush's declaration that "**goodwill begets goodwill**" -- for hostages in exchange for unfreezing Iranian assets. Iran facilitated the release of American and Western hostages in Lebanon. Instead of goodwill, the United States responded by heightening pressures and hostilities, which convinced Iran's new leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that the United States could not be trusted to keep its promises. During Mohammad Khatami's presidency, Iran was among the first countries to condemn the 9/11 terrorists attacks and cooperate with the United States in the "war on terror," leading to the removal of the Taliban and al Qaeda from Afghanistan in 2001. In return, the United States rewarded Iran by designating it a member of the "axis of evil."

As recently as 2011, Iran, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, offered to invite the U.S. representative in Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, to Tehran for talks on cooperation in Afghanistan, welcomed the Russian "step-by-step plan" to resolve the nuclear crisis, offered five years of full supervision by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over Iran's nuclear program, and proposed halting uranium enrichment to 20 percent and instead limiting it to 5 percent, if Iran was provided with fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor. However, the United States and the West responded to all these unprecedented overtures with mounting pressures, sanctioning oil exports and Iran's Central Bank, and advancing U.N. resolutions that condemn Iran on terrorism and human rights.

Recognizing that mistrust is mutual is the first step toward confidence building. A second step is to acknowledge that the international community's "dual track" policy of pressure and diplomacy toward Iran has in fact been mostly a single track of coercion, sanctions, covert war, and isolation -- with no clear, coherent, strategic vision on the kind of relationship the United States can ultimately accept with the Islamic Republic. There has not been a meaningful agenda of specific proposals for practical ways to build confidence through diplomacy.

The third requirement for progress is for the United States to guarantee Iran that if it answers all of the IAEA's outstanding questions, the United States, Israel, and others will not use this information to ratchet up sanctions or other forms of coercion against Iran. The IAEA has frequently confirmed that it has found no evidence of Iran's nuclear materials being diverted for military purposes, but to close the file and end the nuclear crisis a more comprehensive *modus vivendi* needs to be established with the United States. Therefore bilateral talks between the United States and Iran must grow out of the coming P5+1 negotiations with Iran.

The fourth imperative is to recognize that Iran perceives small "step-by-step" negotiations as a trap. The Iranians have experienced such piecemeal policies for the last three decades with no success and no end to the fundamental conflict with the United States. Iran needs to know the entire game plan, including the end goal, before committing itself to anything. Thus, the next talks between the P5+1 and Iran will fail if the United States and other P5+1 members take a "piecemeal approach," asking Iran for example to reduce uranium enrichment

from 20 percent to five percent in exchange for fuel rods. This idea is no longer attractive for Iran, since it has already reached the 20 percent enrichment level and produced fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor.

What's the best way to remove the atmosphere of crisis and to create a more stable basis for addressing Iran's relations with its neighbors and the broader international community? World powers must use negotiations on the nuclear crisis to resolve outstanding issues with the IAEA and allow Iran to exercise its right to enrich uranium while guaranteeing that this will not lead to nuclear weapons. "Commitments against rights" is the win-win formula. Iran would gain recognition of its legitimate right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes, the lifting of relevant sanctions, and the normalization of its nuclear file at the United Nations and the IAEA. The P5+1 would gain specific commitments and measures to guarantee that Iran will not make a nuclear weapon, assuring the international community of Tehran's commitment to remain a non-nuclear weapon state.

The current pressures only encourage Iran to be intransigent and a peaceful and reasonable solution to this imminent confrontation is necessary, now. After 30 plus years of mistrust, the stakes are now way too high to risk going about this in a piecemeal fashion.

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