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SNAPSHOT

How to Engage Iran

What Went Wrong Last Time — And How to Fix It

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Members of the Iranian air force re-enact Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's arrival to Iran in 1979. (Courtesy Reuters)

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, two major schools of thought have influenced Iran's foreign policy toward the United States. The first maintains that Iran and the United States can reach a compromise based on mutual respect, noninterference in domestic affairs, and the advancement of shared interests. Those who hold this view acknowledge the animosity and historical grievances between the two countries but argue that it is possible to normalize their relations. The second school is more pessimistic. It deeply distrusts the United States and believes that Washington is neither ready nor committed to solving the disputes between the two countries.

Having worked within the Iranian government for nearly 30 years, and having sat on the secretariat of Iran's Supreme National Security Council for much of the decade before 2005, I was involved in discussions about both of these two approaches. My first personal experience in these matters dates to the late 1980s, when the critical issue facing the United States and Europe was the release of Western hostages in Lebanon. During that period, Iran received dozens

of messages from Washington proposing that each side, echoing U.S. President George H. W. Bush's 1989 inaugural address, show "goodwill for goodwill."

That year, Bush offered then Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani a deal: If Iran assisted in securing the release of U.S. and Western hostages in Lebanon, the United States would respond with a gesture of its own. In response, Tehran emphasized its expectation that the United States would unfreeze and return billions of dollars in Iranian assets that were being held in the United States. The Iranian leadership also came away from discussions believing that Israel would reciprocate by releasing some Lebanese hostages, specifically Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid, the leader of Hezbollah.

Then the two schools of thought came into play. Rafsanjani believed that this deal could be a confidence-building measure that would lead to rapprochement with the United States. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, warned against trusting the United States and thought it naive to expect Washington to repay Tehran's efforts in kind. Then, as now, he believes that the United States is after nothing less in Iran than regime change. Ultimately, Iran decided to play a key role in securing the release of all Western hostages in Lebanon. But the United States neither released Iranian assets nor facilitated the release of Lebanese hostages.

Despite the affront, in subsequent years, Ayatollah Khamenei did not prevent Rafsanjani or, later, President Muhammad Khatami, from making more overtures to the West. In 1997, for example, Iran ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, an agreement to decommission all chemical weapons by 2012. The same year, it also joined the Biological Weapons Convention. After 2001, Iran helped the United States oust the Taliban from much of Afghanistan, and for 20 consecutive months, between 2003 and 2005, it cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency. As the IAEA requested, the government opened various military facilities to inspections, suspended its enrichment activities, and implemented the Additional Protocol.

Although Iran expected that these gestures would open the way for it to continue a nuclear program (which it is authorized to do as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), the United States and the West simply developed a new set of complaints against Iran. These included questions about Iran's nuclear-related program, its intentions toward Israel, and its hostility toward the U.S. military role in the region, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather than reward Iran for cooperation, the United States implemented new sanctions and worked to increase international pressure on Tehran.

Ayatollah Khamenei was not surprised by Washington's behavior. Throughout this time, he routinely rejected direct talks with the United States aimed at a rapprochement. He argued that the United States wanted to negotiate from a position of strength; accordingly, it employed intimidation, pressure, and sanctions to bully Iran into submission. The West's increasingly hostile reactions to what Iran's leaders believed were moderate policies eventually gave the radicals the upper hand in domestic policies. And that ultimately led to the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Looking back, it is difficult to list all of the steps that each side might have taken to reverse the downward spiral in relations that followed. Certainly, the West, the United States in particular, missed great opportunities during the moderate presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami. More certainly, both sides would have needed a stronger commitment to changing the direction of U.S.-Iran relations.

U.S. President Barack Obama's inauguration offered an opportunity for a new beginning. And once in office, he

immediately signaled his willingness to enter into a dialogue with the Islamic Republic on a wide range of issues, aiming to remove 30 years of hostilities and create "constructive ties" between the two countries. In my view, even though the Iranian leadership was still skeptical about Obama's ability to break many long-standing U.S. policies, it believed in his personal intentions. For that reason, Iran's leaders decided to test the possibility of a breakthrough by granting a freer hand to Ahmadinejad in managing the relationship with Washington.

To be sure, much of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric about the relationship was harsh. But Iran made some unprecedented overtures as well. As Mohamed El Baradei, the former director of the IAEA, revealed in his memoir, Ahmadinejad sent a message in 2009 through him offering Obama a grand bargain. According to El Baradei, the Iranian president expressed a desire for direct talks with the United States, which would lead to bilateral negotiations, without preconditions. The talks would be held on the basis of mutual respect, and Iran would agree to help the United States in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Obama did not respond.

Almost all Westerners blame Tehran for the decline in relations since. They point to the failure of an initiative to swap Iran's highly enriched uranium for less-enriched fuel rods, which Russia and the United States proposed in Geneva in October 2009. A short time after that meeting, the Iranian government told El Baradei that Tehran would be willing to make the deal directly with the United States. Washington rejected the offer. Iran subsequently signed a similar agreement with Brazil and Turkey. That could have been an important confidence-building measure, but the United States rejected it, too.

In December 2010, the United States demonstrated for the first time a readiness to recognize Iran's legitimate right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. In an [interview](#) [1] with the BBC, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Iran could enrich uranium once it demonstrated that it could do so in a responsible manner in accordance with its international obligations. In response, Iran made new overtures toward the United States. A reliable source told me that, during a February 2011 conference in Sweden, Iran's deputy foreign minister extended an official invitation to Marc Grossman, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, to visit Iran for talks on cooperation in Afghanistan. Washington dismissed the offer.

Then, in October 2011, Iran invited an IAEA team, led by Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts, to visit the research-and-development sections of its heavy-water and centrifuge facilities. A contact told me that during the visit, Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, offered a blank check to the IAEA, granting full transparency, openness to inspections, and cooperation with the IAEA. He also [informed](#) [2] Nackaerts of Iran's receptiveness to putting the country's nuclear program under "full IAEA supervision," including implementing the Additional Protocol for five years, provided that sanctions against Iran were lifted.

Trying to make Iran's good intentions clearer, during a trip to New York in September 2011, Ahmadinejad announced that two American hikers who were being held in Iranian custody would be released. He signaled Iran's readiness to stop uranium enrichment to 20 percent if the United States gave the country fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor in return. This was an immensely important move to satisfy some of the West's demands and demonstrate that Iran is not seeking highly enriched uranium.

But the United States responded negatively again. Washington accused Tehran of plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. It also [influenced](#) [3] the substance and tone of the IAEA's November report on Iran by adding accusations of possible military dimensions to the country's nuclear program. Last month, Washington

sanctioned the Central Bank of Iran; in effect, placed an oil embargo on the country; sponsored a UN resolution against Iran on terrorism; and orchestrated a UN resolution condemning Iran on human rights.

Explaining his Iran policy in New York in January, Obama proudly announced that he had mobilized the world and built an "unprecedented" sanctions regime targeting Iran. Obama said U.S.-led sanctions had reduced Iran's economy to "[shambles](#) [4]." Three short years after the Obama administration introduced an engagement policy, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta named Iran a "pariah state," reminding many of the previous administration's branding of Iran as part of the "axis of evil." Panetta [noted](#) [5] that he hoped Obama's new policy would weaken the regime so that "they have to make a decision about whether they continue to be a pariah or whether they decide to join the international community."

These statements are clear evidence that Obama's engagement policy has failed. In fact, they support Ayatollah Khamenei's assessment that the core goal of U.S. policy is regime change. The door to rapprochement is closing. To keep it from slamming shut, the United States should declare, without condition, that it does not seek regime change in Tehran. Beyond that, the recognition of several principles is essential to bettering U.S.-Iranian relations after more than 30 bad years. For starters, both governments should practice patience and try to show mutual goodwill.

For one, both the United States and Iran are eager to understand the other's end game. Together, the two countries should draft a "grand agenda," which would include nuclear and all other bilateral, international, and regional issues to be discussed; outline what the ultimate goal will be; and describe what each side can gain by achieving it.

The United States and Iran should also work together on establishing security and stability in Afghanistan and preventing the Taliban's full return to power; securing and stabilizing Iraq; creating a Persian Gulf body to ensure regional stability; cooperating during accidents and emergencies at sea, ensuring freedom of navigation, and fighting piracy; encouraging development in Central Asia and the Caucasus; establishing a joint working group for combating the spread of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism; and eliminating weapons of mass destruction and drug trafficking in the Middle East. Finally, the two countries could do much good by strengthening the ties between their people through tourism, promoting academic and cultural exchanges, and facilitating visas.

It would be misguided for the United States to count on exploiting possible cleavages within the Iranian leadership. Iran's prominent politicians have their differences -- like those in all countries -- but they will be united against foreign interference and aggression. Both capitals should also progressively reduce threat-making, hostile behavior, and punitive measures during engagement to prove that they seek a healthier relationship. Engagement policy should be accompanied by actual positive actions, not just words.

I know enough about the dangers involved in the current direction of U.S. and Iranian policies to believe that change is essential. There is a peaceful path -- one that will satisfy both Iranian and U.S. objectives while respecting Iran's legitimate nuclear rights. Washington and Tehran must find that right path together, and, despite what passes for debate in the international arena today, I believe they can.

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[1] <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/12/152339.htm>

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[3] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-11/10/c_122258400.htm

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[5] <http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>