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“U.S.-Iran Relations, Past, Present and Future”

Atlantic Council

Tuesday, June 3, 2014, 9:00am-11:00am

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor Washington, DC 20005

On Tuesday June 3, 2014, the Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center hosted a conversation called “U.S.-Iran Relations, Past, Present and Future.” The discussion featured **Seyyed Hossein Mousavian**, diplomat and author of *Iran and the United States: An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*, and **John Marks**, President and Founder of Search for Common Ground. The conversation was moderated by **Barbara Slavin**, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center.

Seyyed Hossein Mousavian began by separating the history of U.S.-Iran relations into three periods. The first period, between 1856 and 1953, was characterized by cordial relations between the two countries, where the U.S. supported Iranian independence and democracy. The second period, from 1953 to 1979, saw relations start to sour beginning with the American supported coup toppling democratically-elected Prime Minister **Mohammad Mosaddegh** in 1953. Mousavian calls this period the “dominant era,” a time where the American-backed Shah ruled as a dictator. The third and final period, from 1979 to present day, began with the Islamic Revolution that deposed the Shah. Mousavian said this era represented the “most hostile type of relations” between two countries, surpassing even U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations. The question Mousavian posed was: why? Having spent time in both Iran and the U.S., Mousavian suggests that foreign policy experts in the U.S. and Iran are disconnected from one another and thus misunderstand each other. Despite the hostilities, Mousavian argues that every Iranian administration has approached the U.S. with a desire to normalize relations, but all efforts have failed. The objective now is to look to the future as Mousavian believes the current state of affairs between the U.S. and Iran cannot be maintained. In a Middle East region that is “on fire,” U.S.-Iran cooperation is necessary. Mousavian proposes that comprehensive negotiations should cover a range of issues, instead of the routine “piecemeal approaches.” Within this discussion, the U.S. must not insist on the nuclear issue being paramount, and must be willing to discuss other issues. Mousavian thinks rapprochement should begin with areas of common interest; the U.S., he argues, mistakenly tends to focus on issues of disagreement. After all, he recalls, **Henry Kissinger** once said that the U.S. and Iran have more common interests than any other two countries. Areas of mutual interest include stopping organized crime and drug trafficking, to supporting governments in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When inevitably the differences do arise, both countries must approach the areas of contention with flexibility. Finally, Mousavian believes American and Iranian politicians must recognize and apologize for past grievances that have polarized the countries from one another; otherwise, the relationship will be unable to move forward.

John Marks spoke next, focusing on the idea of utilizing “civilian diplomacy.” Civilian diplomacy, which Marks also describes as “people to people” diplomacy, attempts to normalize relations through simple access to one another’s countries. Marks talked about a group he worked with that held confidential meetings in 1996 in Sweden, which worked through tentative agreements. Plans for a unified settlement were made, however U.S. and Iran counterparts failed to sell it “back home.” Instead,

Marks' group proposed to simply have Americans return to Tehran. They sent American wrestlers to compete in a tournament, and flew the first American flag in Tehran since the Revolution. Marks then discussed the efforts of Ambassador **Bill Miller** in organizing a "technical facilitation group," after becoming a special advisor for U.S.-Iran relations. This group, made up of nuclear scientists from both countries, offered "technical suggestions" to resolve differences of opinion on nuclear issues. Adding to this cooperation, Marks' working group continued with a list of activities to "change the climate," not only on policy issues, but "people to people" issues of culture and society. Marks too emphasized the need for both sides to recognize and apologize for past grievances in hopes of moving on with the relationship and to address issues of common interest. In other words, Marks suggests the two nations must "understand differences, act on commonalities."

Barbara Slavin began the question and answer section by posing a question to Mr. Mousavian asking how the international community can be confident the Iranian hardliners will not derail future negotiations with the U.S. Mousavian proposed that the same question could be asked of hardliners within the American government, as they continue to impose sanctions despite the fact that Iran has granted access to International Atomic Energy Agency officials. He suggests that neither side will ever be able to create a consensus within their countries, but instead leaders must "politically will" their cohorts to act on issues of mutual concern. Marks added that both sides must discount one another's hardliners and cooperate instead of operating on a platform of mistrust. Answering a question on whether Iran would cooperate on issues of Hezbollah, which the U.S. considers a terrorist organization, Mousavian pointed out that the U.S. maintains cordial relations with several Muslim countries that do not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization. He emphasized again that U.S. and Iran must focus first on common interests.