



Is it time to open the door to better relations with Iran?

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Historian Robert Kaplan says that geo-political necessities have given longtime enemies, the United States and Iran, some pressing common interests. Is it time to open the door to a working relationship? As part of a collaboration between The Atlantic and the PBS NewsHour, Judy Woodruff interviews Kaplan and others about the complexities of warming relations.

TRANSCRIPT

JUDY WOODRUFF: Well before President George W. Bush labeled it part of the axis of evil, Iran was viewed as a leading enemy of the U.S.

For more than three decades, they have had no diplomatic relations. But with serious negotiations now under way about curbing Iran's nuclear program and the rise of a newer, common threat, the Islamic State, some foreign policy thinkers are arguing it's time for a thaw.

In the latest of our series of collaborations with The Atlantic magazine, we take a look at their arguments on both sides of rethinking U.S. relations with Iran — tonight, the first of two reports.

There was the expected royal welcome awaiting the president at the airport in Tehran.

Four decades have passed since I was a White House correspondent for NBC News covering what would turn out to be the last official visit by a U.S. head of state to Iran.

PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER: Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world.

JUDY WOODRUFF: In just a little over a year, the shah would be overthrown and forced into

exile, the U.S. Embassy stormed, and 66 Americans held hostage for 144 days.

Ever since, the status quo has been enmity between Iran and the West. Some experts, like historian Robert Kaplan, believe it is it time to open the door to Iran.

ROBERT KAPLAN, *The Atlantic*: Foreign policy is about necessity, not desires.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But you're talking about a country that has considered America the great Satan.

ROBERT KAPLAN: I'm not talking about peace. I'm talking about detente. And detente is what you do with enemies, not with friends.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN, Former Spokesperson, Iranian Nuclear Negotiation Team:

Americans and Iranians both, since 1979, they have used all their capacity to confront each other, no doubt about it.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Hossein Mousavian, former spokesperson for Iran's nuclear negotiation team, is used to representing Iran in the West.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: From the Iranian point of view, the reason they really cannot trust the U.S. is when the U.S. backed dictators in Iran, second, when the U.S. supported the Saddam invasion of Iran, a war which aimed at dismantling Iran.

We have a history of mistrust, misunderstanding, miscalculations. There is a more important fact. The common interests between Iran and the U.S. is huge.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer is a powerful opponent of the idea of any softening of the West's position on Iran.

How does Israel view the U.S.-Iran relationship?

RON DERMER, Ambassador, Israel: Well, even in the Middle East, Judy, you need two to tango. Iran is not interested in any rapprochement with the United States. They are not changing their behavior in the region at all. They are saying that they are not going to change their behavior in the region.

Iran is the foremost sponsor of terrorism in the world.

RICHARD HAASS, Council on Foreign Relations: Iran is an imperial power. Iran has a vision of its role in the Middle East, as the dominant influence.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Richard Haass, the head of the Council on Foreign Relations, shares the skepticism.

RICHARD HAASS: Look at the differences the United States and Iran have in virtually every other aspect in the Middle East, about Israel and the Palestinians, about Syria, about Iraq.

RON DERMER: The reason why you have a problem in Syria is because of Iran, because of Iran's support for Assad. Why is Lebanon not free today? Because of Iran through its proxy, Hezbollah. Iran is responsible for the murder of hundreds of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But Robert Kaplan sees the outlines of a different relationship emerging, where former enemies, the U.S. and Iran, now have common interests.

ROBERT KAPLAN: The rise of the Islamic State has given new urgency to the situation, because the Islamic State is an enemy of the United States, but is also the enemy of Shia Iran, so that we have a convergence of interests now.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: Iranians and Americans are the leading regional international force fighting ISIS. Americans are leading the airstrike, and Iranians are leading the ground strike.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Mousavian believes Iran could also be helpful in Afghanistan, and he says it wouldn't be the first time.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: You can see the same history during war on terror 2001 in Afghanistan. Iranian army security establishments, they were cooperating shoulder by shoulder with the Americans to fight al-Qaida and Taliban.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But critics argue that any kind of rapprochement with Shia Iran would play into Islam's 14-century-old rivalry, which pits majority Sunni countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia against Shia Iran.

RON DERMER: These two groups both hate the United States.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Ambassador Ron Dermer sees a chance to play Sunni against Shia.

RON DERMER: So, when your enemies are fighting each other, you don't take a side. You don't strengthen one of them. You try to weaken them both.

JUDY WOODRUFF: The toppling of Saddam Hussein was something both the U.S. and Iran supported. Mousavian says the two countries are better off if they also clean up the current crises together.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: Directly or indirectly, Iran and the U.S., they cooperated to remove Saddam. It was enemy of Iran. It was enemy of the U.S. Today, definitely, they have common interests for the peace, security, and stability in Iraq.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But in another country, Syria, Iran is supporting the Assad regime, a brutal dictator.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: See, Judy, don't get me wrong. I didn't want to say, on every issue in the Middle East, we have the same views. I'm saying we have our differences, like Israeli issue, Palestinian issue, Syrian issue.

ROBERT KAPLAN: To get Assad out or to weaken him or to move him aside cannot be done without some sort of acquiescence with Iran, because, if we just kill him, the result may be like when we dismantled the regime in Iraq.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Some would argue that that's already happened, I mean, that Syria's already in chaos.

ROBERT KAPLAN: I would argue this, that there are different levels of chaos, that you could go from a Balkan level of atrocity to a Rwandan level of atrocity. Don't say that things cannot get much worse, because they can.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Responsibility for the brutal attacks in Paris just two weeks ago has been claimed by the AQAP, the Arabian Peninsula branch of al-Qaida operating from Yemen. Kaplan sees Iran as a potential asset here, too.

ROBERT KAPLAN: Iranian rebels in Yemen are the only ones, it appears, with the capability on the ground of taking on al-Qaida.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Just last week, the same Iranian-backed Houthi rebels took control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, the seat of the country's government.

Do you think a detente of a sort with Iran would mean less U.S. military engagement?

ROBERT KAPLAN: The goal is, is for you to do less of the fighting and get your allies in the region or even your former enemies in the region to do more of the fighting or more of the balancing for you.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Despite this talk of a possible thaw, critics remain wary of Iran, at best.

RICHARD HAASS: The gap between where we are and what you're describing as a kind of a strategic rapprochement is large. It's closer to a chasm. Should we try to bridge it? Sure, but we shouldn't kid ourselves that it's in any way close.

RON DERMER: Iran controls four Arab capitals. They control — effectively control Iraq, large parts of Iraq. They control Syria through Assad. They control Lebanon through Hezbollah. They control Gaza in their support of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and they're now going to control Yemen, and they're doing all of this without a nuclear weapon.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Tomorrow night, we will focus on the nuclear talks in part two of our collaboration on Iran with The Atlantic magazine.

This report was produced by Sydney Trattner and Francois Bringer, with consulting producer Mark Carter.

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