

Iran and the US: Engagement or Confrontation

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Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, the US has adopted a policy of confrontation with Iran. Iran continues to appear yearly on the US State Department's list of states sponsoring terrorism. Additionally, Iran has been accused of pursuing a program to develop weapons of mass destruction.

The US policymakers continue to pressure Iran, imposing a unilateral sanction. By studying the records of US – Iran relations, this paper argues that US policies regarding Iran have been counterproductive. It seems that establishing a cooperative framework on issues of mutual interests, especially on non-political ones will be productive.

Keywords: *Islamic Revolution, Confrontation Policy, Engagement Policy, European Union, Iran/US Relations, NPT, Persian Gulf, Iran/ Iraq War, US Sanction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran and the seizure of the US embassy, Iran's relations with the West have been badly strained and often inconsistent. After the termination of the war, between Iran and Iraq, both Iran and the European Union (EU) took several steps to moderate their confrontation policies, among these initiatives being the establishment of a critical dialogue between the EU and Iran. This more moderate foreign policy was driven by both the EU and Iran's desires to improve economic relations and to decrease tension. Until now, these relations have experienced different successes and failures. One of the latest ones includes NPT negotiations between Iran and three European countries.

On the other hand, Iran continues to appear yearly on the US State Department's list of states sponsoring terrorism. The United States accuses Iran of its involvement in the planning and support of terrorist acts and, in particular, supporting violent Palestinian groups. Additionally, Iran has been accused of pursuing a program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Although Iran has ratified the Nuclear Weapon Nonproliferation Treaty, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, all of which prohibit the development, production or use of these weapons, the United States claims that Tehran is engaged in an effort to acquire WMD and the means to deliver them.

The US, in particular, has focused on Iran's cooperation with other states, notably Russia and North Korea, to secure both more sophisticated weapons systems such as medium range ballistic missile and nuclear technology. Iran insists that in the former case it is responding to legitimate security concerns posed by Iraq, Pakistan, Israel and the US itself, while in the latter, it is seeking to develop nuclear power under international supervision for peaceful purposes. It is not surprising therefore, that tentative steps to improving relations with the US are fizzled. Nevertheless, Iran has sought to take concrete measures to improve its international image.

The US declaring its frustration with the pace of reform and concern over Iran's foreign activities have led to disenchantment with the carrot and stick approach. Some US observers

believe that popular discontent runs deep inside Iran and that pre-revolutionary conditions now exist in Iran. The US believes that the best hope for change comes from outside the circles of power, through the actions of the Iranians dissatisfied with their economic condition and seeking democracy.¹

The main questions arise here: how can these kinds of hard-line policies radically improve the situation in Iran? Would the US policy of confrontation induce a considerable change in Iran's foreign policy? What were the results of US policy of confrontation with Iran? This paper argues that the West² and especially the US policies regarding Iran have been counterproductive, and if the same policy continues, the results would be the same as before. The paper suggests that the US may reconsider having the same idea regarding Iran as it has about North Korea or Saddam Hussein in Iraq. With better relations, meaningful and constructive dialogue, Iran may effectively and positively play a role in shaping the security framework in the Persian Gulf and the Middle-East.

Iran-US relations and confrontations have been observed by many academics before. Many ignored the background of Iranian image of the US, introducing Iran as a terrorist country under dictatorship. They maintain a "good boy", "bad boy" dichotomy with regards to US-Iran relations and tensions. This normative interpretation has been misleading, as they mainly neglect many other variables in the study. Many of them ignore past American records in Iran, such as its effective contribution to bringing about the fall of Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, the leader of Iranian National Movement in 1950s, its blind support for Pahlavi regime during the Iranian revolution, its offensive behaviors regarding Iran's revolution including the planning of a military coup against it, its support of Saddam Hussein during eight years of imposed war during 1980-88, and its unilateral sanctions.

Some other analysts of Iran-US relations emphasize Iran's foreign policy and its linkage to power struggle inside Iran. They see Iran's hardliners as main obstacle for improving relations between these two countries. Many of them portray Iranian reformists as American supporters and they expect public turmoil in the near future as a hope for changing the situation. They do not accept that the reformists and conservatives are both defending the same principles in Iran's foreign policy, so they overestimate the reformist power for change.³ It means that while the differences between these factions are real, they should not be exaggerated. The differences between them is in emphasis, not in principles, as within the ruling elites there are different factions representing a variety of interests and many analysts refer to conservative, radical and pragmatic factions within the political spectrum. There are real disagreements and competition between them, but none would advocate a policy which might undermine the foundation of the Islamic Republic.

Most of the literature on Iran-US relations — namely, confrontation — do not offer any meaningful picture of international image of the US. It ignores the global context in which the American, with their unilateral "interventionist" and somehow, "aggressive" foreign

¹ The first major public expression of distaste for any kind of engagement with Iranian government came with President Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address, in which he singled out Iran, Iraq and North Korea as forming "an axis of evil".

² By the West we mean the most developed industrialized countries, especially the EU countries.

³ This paper highlights "the need for time". It means, Iran as a developing country can not change drastically "just overnight", but it needs many years to find and to pave the way for political and social development. Injection of "foreign solutions" from the outside neither solves the problem nor makes the situation better than the present.

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policy behavior, disturbs the minds of many people in the world, especially among Moslems. It does not pay any attention to how making a link between the Islamic world and terrorism is counter-productive and even destructive. They have less concern regarding America's blind support of Israel and how the Jewish lobby inside the US can affect its foreign policy.

This paper suggests that we analyze the Iran-US confrontation relations in its global context. Iran is not separable from the Islamic world, and US regional and international behavior has a definite impact on these two countries' relations. It argues that the US policies during the Islamic revolution and its support of Saddam Hussein's imposed war on Iran may have contributed to the current situation.

While many arguments magnify Iran's offensive behaviors, they downgrade or generally ignore all aggressive and offensive policies adopted by the US. This paper suggests that the US needs to revise its calculation and prediction about Iran's conditions and its social movement. It suggests that Iran, as an independent country, has a specific position in the Islamic world and among the developing countries. No regional security in the Persian Gulf can be achieved without Iran's contribution.

2. IRAN AND THE WORLD

Iran is located at the center of the world's largest pool of energy; it straddles prominently the global oil and natural gas checkpoints at the Strait of Hormuz. It provides the cheapest and the shortest transit route at the heart of the ancient Silk Road for the transport of energy resources from the Caspian Sea basin to the world markets through the Persian Gulf; and it is the most populated country with one of the largest industrial bases in the vast region stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Since the nineteenth century, when Iran arrived fully into the world of politics, to the eruption of the Iranian Revolution, Iran played either the role of a weak and backward buffer state between imperial Russia and Britain or the role of a surrogate state of Britain and the United States. This historical experience helps us imagine Iran's future role in the world. The Islamic Revolution of Iran created an unprecedented opportunity for its leaders to utilize Iran's strategic significance in such a way as to enable the people to eventually control their own destiny freely and play a major role on the world stage.

The Iranian struggle for independence and freedom strikes deep roots in the collective memory of the Iranian people. Two historic opportunities to fulfill these principles were destroyed by foreign powers. Russia and Britain divided up Iran into their spheres of influence in 1907 and destroyed any chance of a constitutional government that could realize both independence and freedom. Ironically, the American government used the CIA to destroy the nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq (Gasiorowski 1991).

After the Islamic Revolution, the new government declared that Iran would pursue a policy based on the principle of non-alignment. This was a strategy initiated by prominent leaders of the developing world in order to pursue a foreign policy independent of the great powers at the start of the Cold War. In pursuit of this policy, Iran soon abandoned the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), joined the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), and cancelled many weapons orders from the West. The assumption of revolutionary leaders was that non-alignment would meet the foreign policy goals of the Islamic Republic as a third world state, whereas an alliance with either the East or the West would not fit into the Iranian religious, cultural or historical context. Moreover, an alliance with one bloc would restrict policy

options in establishing and maintaining beneficial ties with states from opposing blocs or with certain developing countries. (Ramazani 1990: 52-64).

Guarding national sovereignty has been considered a very important issue for Iranians. Based on this, the Iranian revolution could be interpreted as a struggle to restore Iran's sovereignty. In the outset of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian society viewed external players as basically shaping Iranian politics and the concurrent crises. But now, Iranian people, with their national independency, want to solve their problems domestically. Since Iran had not been dominated by the United States, Britain or any other power over the last two decades, both the Iranian state and society want to manage Iran by themselves.

The declaration of non-alignment was the result of Tehran's major policy goals which included acquiring autonomy in foreign policy — making, avoiding direct involvement in the American — Soviet rivalry, ending Iran's dependence on a single ideological camp and to improve its ties with all nations except Israel and former South African regime. The revolutionary leaders claimed that their decision to follow a non-alignment strategy was taken mainly because dependency, the trademark of the Shah's regime, was culturally an anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian notion.

In the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini captured in his best known motto the principles of independence and freedom along side Islam. The constitution of the Republic also embraced these principles. The goal of independence, as perceived at the time, was achieved at least in part (Khomeini 1981: 59-61). A quarter of a century of American domination was terminated. For the first time in modern history, Iranian leaders achieved an unprecedented degree of control over their country's destiny at home and in world affairs. Even the brutal invasion by Iraq did not make a dent in Iran's determination to preserve its independence. On the contrary, the eight-year war presented to Iranians the overriding importance of preserving the nation's independence.

3. IRAN AND THE US: THE RECORD OF RELATIONS AND TENSIONS

After the revolution, the US policymakers wanted to maintain relations with Iran, because of their economic, political and military interests. However, after the Shah's fall, US relations with Iran were never normalized, and on the contrary, changed into increased anti-Americanism. (Sick 1985).

The Carter administration relied only on the moderates in the Bazargan government, isolating itself from the revolution by ignoring its main leader. Meanwhile, there were some events which could be interpreted as clear US hostility toward Iran, such as non-recognition of the new regime, the Elghanian case, CIA intervention in Iranian internal affairs, and finally the admission of Mohammad Reza Shah to the US. All of these, together with the policy failures mentioned before, led the revolutionaries to react, most notably by taking over the embassy. With the US and Western condemnation and blockade against Iran, the revolution remained in political international isolation, contributing effectively to the outbreak of Iraqi invasion in 1980 (Hart 1995).

The US never recognized the failures of its past policies in Iran, which can partially be interpreted as the roots of anti-American feeling in Iran, such as the 1953 CIA engineered coup against prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq and its long support for the unpopular regime of the Shah (Rubin 1980). The US adopted the same policies even after the revolution, breeding more extremism in Iran.

By the time Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, revolutionary Iran drew the US and Iraq together, setting aside their real differences. US policymakers adopted a dual policy toward the Iran-Iraq War; firstly, they concealed the sense of satisfaction with the Iraqi invasion because of many opportunities that the invasion created for the Carter administration; secondly, they maintained Iran's strategic position and integrity in the region as a buffer to the Soviet Union, since the Islamic government in Tehran was at once anti-American and anti-Soviet (Bradley 1982).

Because of the hostage crisis in Tehran and the US-Iran failure to construct diplomatic relations, the US never condemned Iraq's evident invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980. With such a policy, the US discounted the aggressive nature of the Ba'th government in Baghdad and consequently opened the way for Saddam's increased ambition in the region and in the Arab world as a whole in the coming years. The critical mistake of both the US and Iraq was their inability to make a proper distinction between attacking a state and attacking a revolution (Henderson 1991).

Two years after Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1982, the situation had completely changed. By the end of 1982, the Iranians had successfully driven the Iraqis out of virtually all Iranian territory. The US developed a series of policies designed to halt an Iranian victory. The US supported Iraq diplomatically, militarily and economically (Murphy 1993).

After the Iran-Contra scandal, the US decided to become directly involved in the war as a way out of the administration's humiliation over this incident. Anti-Iran policy drew broad support from within the Reagan administration as a victory for the radical group in the State Department and the Pentagon, which pursued the more pro-Iraqi line in the Iran-Iraq war, including reflagging the Kuwaiti tankers, direct military confrontation with Iran including a missile attack on Iran's civilian flight killing all its passengers, and finally initiating a resolution in the Security Council favorable to Iraq (Woodward 1987). US policies fueled an already explosive situation in the Persian Gulf, contributing greatly to the militarization of the region in the 1980s and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990⁴.

The war ended with both Iran and Iraq territorially and politically unsatisfied with the status quo. Iraq greeted the 20 August 1988 cease-fire as a victory, but although Iraq gained political advantage from the war, the post-war situation did not enhance Iraq's security to the degree desired. Iraq was still confronting a demographically and geographically superior neighbor, and the territorial status quo ante was not a real victory in terms of enhanced security. In effect, the US policy helped to shape an unstable polarization in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s, for the war confirmed the function of the GCC (The Gulf Cooperation Council) as a coalition against Iran, and de facto ally of Iraq. This alliance continued after the August 1988 ceasefire up until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

With strong US support for the unpopular regime of the Shah and its different governments including the military one that was responsible for killing thousands of Iranian people during the Islamic Revolution, the US lost its credibility for many Iranians. US behavior was a sign of hostility to popular rule in their country. After the victory of the revolution, the US was not prepared to accept this fact, and instead of initiating policy of accommodation and avoiding Iranian distrust, the US government behaved in a way that actually aggravated the estrangement and contributed to the ascendancy of radical forces in

⁴ It seems that the US did not consider the Ba'th regime in Baghdad as a serious threat for the US neither made an attempt to integrate Saddam Hussein into international order, nor to deter him. US policies toward Iran-Iraq war raised the level of antagonism between Iran and the US.

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the revolution condition (Sick 1995).

This contributed greatly to the militarization of the region in the 1980s. Saddam Hussein could never have invaded Kuwait in 1990 if his aggression had not been preceded by many years of unnecessary militarization of the region. These policies were justified by the idea that providing friendly government in the region with modern weaponry would help with the task of containing revolutionary Iran and help offset trade deficits through export earnings derived from arms sales. In 1990s, Iraq changed into a complicated enemy and Saudi Arabia's vulnerability during the Gulf crisis demonstrated that billions spent on modern weapons system do not necessarily guarantee security against external threats (Dawisha 1991).

Since the 1990s, the US has continued hard line policies regarding Iran, making the improvement in US-Iran's bilateral relation far more difficult. The first US sanctions against Iran were formalized in November 1979, and during the hostage crisis, many sanctions were imposed against the Iranian government. By 1987, the import of Iranian goods into the United States had been banned. In 1995, President Clinton issued the Executive Order 12957, banning US investment in Iran's energy sector, which was followed a few weeks later by the Executive Order 12957 of May 6, 2000, eliminating all trade and investment and virtually all interaction between the United States and Iran (Philip 1994). The US demands Iran's compliance, attaching certain conditions for the lifting of its unilateral sanctions, including: ending support for radical organizations such as Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas; ceasing active opposition to an Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and suspending its alleged WMD programs.

From Iran's perspective, the dialogues should emphasize; an end to Washington's efforts to overthrow the regime in Tehran, as exemplified by the \$ 20 million given the CIA to that end; an end to support for anti-regime activities abroad; an end to hostile propaganda over the airwaves against Iran, particularly as perceived to encourage the secession of Iranian Azerbaijan. Tehran wants the Americans to abandon their sanctions and drop objections to the transfer to Iran of advanced technology "for peaceful nuclear purposes". It also wants to resolve outstanding financial claims, as well as to be included in regional oil and gas projects involving the other Caspian Sea riparian states (International Crisis Group, Report no.5 2002).

The rupture in relations between the United States and Iran has exacted a certain cost upon overall US interests. The handicaps on Iran as a player in the Persian Gulf suspend the evolution of "normal geopolitics" in the region and distort the development of future security arrangements. US allies in the Persian Gulf, while concerned about Iran's intentions in the region, are also uncomfortable with the level of confrontation which keeps tensions high and restrict their diplomatic options vis-à-vis Iran. The US hostility has largely benefited the hard liners in Iran who prefer confrontation as a way of the crisis.⁵

On the other hand, US relations with European allies are significantly strained by US unilateral sanctions against European firms that engage in business activities with Iran. Some Europeans have refused to comply and are considering retaliatory measures against the US. European states, moreover, do not share US analysis of the nature of the Iranian problem and do not support most US tactical measures taken in dealing with Iran. Meanwhile, US economic sanctions upon Iran are costly to the American firms since the US policies tend to

⁵ In addition, US policies towards Iran reflect diplomatic pressure from Israel, as the strong support of the pro-Israeli attitudes from successful lobbying is institutionalized to some degree in the Congress.

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push Iran into much closer relations with Russia, including connivance on Caspian energy issues. But normal commercial energy planning in the region can not take place while Iran is excluded (Katzman 1995).

By blocking Iranian transit routes, the United States encourages alternative routes through Russia, giving Russia leverage over this flow — much to the dismay of the newly independent Caspian states. Thus, while Iran remains the preferred pipeline transit option for most oil companies in developing Caspian energy, some of them feel they must exclude that option. Consequently, US political hostility towards Iran impedes development of the vast East-West transport corridors along the new Silk Route, affecting the interests of Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and China.

From the Iranian point of view, US policies unfairly hinder the development of the Iranian economy already hurt severely by the punishing eight-year Iran — Iraq war. Iran's ability to develop and modernize its own energy sector has been seriously hampered, even though Iran remains the second largest oil producer in the Persian Gulf today, despite its isolation from much of the rest of the world, partly as a result of US pressure.

Initially, both Iran and the US had hoped that Afghanistan could serve as a catalyst for renewed cooperation on the basis of mutual national interests. When the US decided to act militarily against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Iran adopted a stance of positive neutrality, expressed readiness to rescue US troops or pilots in distress on its own territory, and approved the use of its territory to transport large US humanitarian shipments of wheat to Afghanistan. Iran also pledged US\$567 million over five years towards the reconstruction of the country and encouraged its erstwhile client, Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Northern Alliance, to abandon his effort to be recognized as president, thus paving the way for the appointment of the US-backed Hamid-Karzai (Afrasiabi 2003).⁶

Iran has largely supported international efforts to manage the transition into a constitutional government but in order to avoid appearing to side with US operations against a fellow Moslem country and to prevent a permanent US military presence in Afghanistan, Iran urged the UN to take a more prominent role in shaping the country's political system. But the US has accused Iran of shepherding fleeing members of the defeated Taliban and al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan via Iran. These accusations have never been confirmed.

So when the demise of the Taliban regime eliminated one threat, the huge presence of the US in the region presented another. The Taliban regime, considered a clear and immediate danger to Iran and its Central Asian neighbors, has been replaced with an American client state that constitutes a realignment affecting Central Asia and the Caspian basin to the detriment of Iran's long term interests. Iran's feeling of insecurity has been fueled by the Bush Administration's anti-Iran policy under the rubric of the "axis of evil," which surfaced in tandem with Washington's open-ended post-September 11 war on international terrorism (Sonboli 2002).

Iran worries about the spillover of the Iraqi conflict over borders. To the east, Afghanistan remains a hotbed of narcotic trafficking. Pakistan is an unstable pivot. To the North, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Armenia are suffering from some level of instability;

⁶ The rapid demise of the Taliban and its replacement with a pro-US interim regime produced anxiety among some in Iran regarding US intentions in the region. Officials in Iran suspected that US intervention in Afghanistan were driven less by the desire to combat terrorism than by geo-strategic ambitions to contain Iran, fight Islam, and consolidate a strategic military foothold near oil rich Central Asia.

to the west, Turkey faces Kurdish irredentism fueled by the neighboring Iraq. In the Persian Gulf, an endemic Sunni militancy led by Al-Qaeda threatens Saudi Arabia Sheikdoms. But it is the Bush administration's advocacy of regime change in Iran that intensifies Iran's current security disquietude.

The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have done away with two direct threats to Iran, but if Tehran continues to feel threatened by regional instability and by Washington and Israel's open advocacy of regime change, it will likely go in the direction of nuclear programs. Thus Iran's decision whether to pursue nuclear development is a matter of striking between national interest and legitimate security worries.

Iran's nuclear program is a source of national pride; in fact, the US encouraged the development of nuclear power plants during the Shah's regime and offered educational programs and incentives for students in that area of study.

There appears to be some debate in Iran on whether the pursuit of nuclear weapons is the proper course to take. Those in favor of nuclear weapons capability use the argument that Iran is surrounded by hostile forces led by the US, and the only way to counter the power of the US and its allies is with the possession of nuclear weapons. The opposing camp argues that Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon only isolates Iran further and drives its neighbors even further into the arms of the US.

The European governments differ from Washington in the matter of handling Iran. Instead of trying to isolate and punish Tehran, the Europeans are trying to change Iran's behavior through economic and diplomatic engagement. This strategy has been reinforced by the mutual need of Europe and the Islamic regime for each other. Iranian oil, the large market it offers, and its strategic location in the Persian Gulf and as a gateway for natural resources from Central Asian countries are all important concerns for Europe. In addition, the well-being of the Iranian economy would guarantee the country's ability to pay back its debt to Europe. On the other side, the American sanctions have left few options for Tehran to satisfy its growing demand for technological know-how, investment and trading partners. In short, the two sides, Europe and Iran, need each other, mainly for economic and financial reasons. Over the last several years, these mutual interests have proved useful in overcoming diplomatic setbacks, the most important of which are the Salman Rushdie affairs and the Mykonos verdict.

4. ASSESSING THE CONFRONTATION POLICY

The US, since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, has never accepted the reality of changes taking place in Iran. The US continuously attempted to achieve the goal of changing Iran's regime and strengthening the opposition groups. In Washington's view, this could best be achieved through the imposition of strict economic sanctions coupled with discrete overtures to the regime and the incentive of further engagement. The US is increasingly placing its hopes in the popular movement of Iranians who support Western liberal democracy (International Crisis Group 2003).

It is difficult to persuade that a popular uprising against the Islamic Republic of Iran lies around the corner. Drawing analogies from the situation that existed in the 1970s is misleading. Unlike the Pahlavi period, the current regime enjoys genuine support from important sectors of the population, including some who strongly oppose its policies. They insist on carrying out reforms, but never ask for the collapse of the whole system. What they

are looking for is some change in Iranian system of power and the mechanism in which the resources are allocated. They do not prescribe violence for achieving their goals, which basically distinguishes them from some foreign-based groups emphasizing on violent confrontation with Tehran's regime (Abootalebi 2000).

During the presidential election campaign of June 2005, the voters were presented with eight candidates with different agendas, who debated their programs on radio and television. This suggests a significant step towards political liberalization. It is important to point out that this freedom is enshrined in the principles of the Iranian constitution. Still, in comparison with both the recent political history of Iran and the practices in neighboring countries, the Iranian government has taken a significant step forward. Furthermore, the Iranian society is moving onwards, where, the youth, the intellectuals and women in particular, are demonstrating a high degree of mobilization.

The Iranian regime has succeeded in establishing a number of working democratic institutions. The competition among them is genuine. What is missing is a system of civil liberties, and autonomous civil society. The large turnout in the 2005 presidential elections in favor of Ahmadinejad shows that the majority of the Iranian people are yearning for more freedom, and social justice.

Iran has confronted challenges from the American-led economic sanctions, a devastating eight-year war with Iraq, the flow of Afghan and Iraqi refugees, and rapid population growth and urbanization. Notwithstanding, and without doubt, the Iranian government, after the victory of the Islamic revolution, has gained a number of great achievements. The government has successfully provided the basic necessities of life to the poorest segments of Iran, including water, paved roads, and electricity. On the other hand, the public sector in Iran has failed to create enough jobs and to meet the demands of the general public for the basic necessities of life. Iran is the second-biggest producer of oil in the Middle East, relying on oil and gas for more than 80 percent of its export earnings, which makes its economic conditions extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices. During the past five years, higher oil prices helped to boost the economy. The non-oil sector has also shown signs of growth. Iran has invested heavily in health care and education, achieving standards above the regional average (Abootalebi 2004).

In certain aspects, the Islamic Republic of Iran proved to be a success, including the issue of literacy rates. At the end of the Shah's regime there were about 37 million Iranians with a literacy rate of about 50 percent. Today, Iran has almost 70 million people with a literacy rate of more than 85 percent. Even on the cultural front, Iran is successful in the film industry and publishing in literature and other areas, all the while stressing the Islamic point of view (Abootalebi 2004).

Given the changes in the past 25 years in the dynamics of state-society relations in Iran, it is very hard to believe that Iran is heading towards the kind of "Taliban" model of regime. We can claim that Iran is heading the process of reforms in the whole region, as it experienced the first constitutional movement almost one hundred years ago, at a time when many states in the region today were still colonies (Abootalebi 2003).

Given the narrow gap between male and female literacy in the younger generation, Iran's successful attempt is admirable considering that in some countries in the region, women are not even allowed to drive cars. Women, now in Iran, account for an estimated 60 percent of total university students. Female suffrage has been recognized in Iran since 1963, and some female members can always be seen in Iran's parliament. Iran has more telephones and personal computers per 1,000 people than the regional average. There has also been rapid

growth in internet use, with one in ten people now thought to have some access to the web(Abootalebi 2004).⁷

In dealing with Iran, the US should not harbor the illusion that its actions, somehow, would radically affect the situation. The US should recognize the right of Iran's people to make autonomous decisions about their future.

At the same time, both Europe and the US should take appropriate actions to deal with Iran on areas of mutual concern — including illegal drug trafficking, the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS, the presence of large numbers of Iraqi and Afghan refugees in Iran and environmental problems. More broadly, the international community should intensify people-to-people exchanges with Iran in all fields, including political, cultural and academic. The international community should encourage Islamic intellectuals and clerics from all shades of political spectrum to participate in dialogues and exchange ideas whose outcome may contribute to loosening the political climate and improving the human rights situation in Iran. Exchange visits of officials could be highly useful. Funds should be directed toward areas of mutual interest including joint workshops, conferences, training and the like, particularly in areas deemed less politically sensitive such as urban development, traffic, deforestation, and the development of human resources.

Hostility in both countries now has become somewhat institutionalized, complicating a rapprochement. In the United States, growing recognition that US policies toward Iran have not been successful and indeed are increasingly costly helps create an openness to change. Meanwhile, economic development is urgently required in Iran to support the necessary and difficult process of political change (Abootalebi 2001).

The more general war of ideas is complex, but it is important to acknowledge that the modernization issue should be addressed behind a great deal of discourse in the Muslim world today about where the forces of change are heading. Iran is seen by many as a potent symbol of rejection of the old pro-US authoritarian order, even by those unsympathetic to Iran. To a certain extent, an ongoing choice of lesser evils pervades the climate of the region and affects political decision-making.

The US should reconsider its blocking of Iran's application to join the World Trade Organization, a stance that is not required by US legislation and that hampers the reform movement by slowing internal change as well as Iran's integration into the world community. WTO membership would require a major revision of Iran's economic and political structure, and thereby promote the kind of reforms such as transparency and the rule of law.⁸

As many argue, sanctions, particularly unilateral sanctions such as those targeted at Iran, are less and less effective in the global economy, where governments have the opportunity to present themselves strategically as necessary partners for other countries (Jentleson 2002). Instead, sanctions are likely to impose further hardships on the poor, while seldom affecting the targeted adversaries — the regime and government officials (Drezner 1999).

If the intent of the sanctions was to limit the Iranian government's military or nuclear

⁷ The international community needs to recognize that the development of democratic ideals and the expansion of political and civil rights do not come about in a short time, but they need many decades and even centuries. The West itself experienced the same thing, and the same process is building up in Iran.

⁸ There is no guarantee of success for aggressive policy regarding Iran. The current policy of demonizing Iran and threatening to impose sanctions will only motivate Tehran to pursue its ambitions further.

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procurements, or limit investment in oil and gas exploration, the sanctions have been a total failure. European companies have taken the lead in investing in Iranian oil and gas fields in the Persian Gulf. Iran's cooperation with Russia, Pakistan and other countries in procuring equipment for its nuclear power plants has also not been affected by the sanctions (Iran Today 2001).

However, if the objective of the sanctions was to punish the Iranian people, sanctions can be deemed quite effective. Iranian state-owned airlines are flying dilapidated planes that put passengers at risk, and the consumers purchase US products at double or triple their original price. Iranian students intending to study at US academic institutions cannot take standardized tests such as TOEFL or GRE, and Iranian academics are barred from publishing papers in US based scientific journals since the US Treasury considers editing an article a financial service. With trade channels limited, only those with control over assets and networks can dominate economic activity. In summary, it could be argued that the sanctions are undermining the growth of a civil society that could serve as a vehicle for democratization in the country (Institute for International Economics 2001).

Many advocates of the US sanctions against Iran have argued that sanctions can serve to foment dissatisfaction of the Iranian people with their government thereby increasing the likelihood of an internal regime change. However, that did not work in the case of Iraq where far harsher multilateral sanctions were in effect, and it is far less likely to succeed in Iran. In fact, whenever the Iranian government felt less isolated, it had been more responsive to the international community. The fact that European pressure on Iran is far more effective than that of the US may be explained by the large investment of European firms in the Iranian oil and gas industries, as well as extensive trade.

It has been argued that rather than promoting democratization and moderation, sanctions may in fact play into the hands of hardliners. So it seems that a historic move towards opening up trade and strengthening the Iranian private sector and civil society could prove more fruitful than the isolationist policies of the past 27 years, which have not had any significant effect on social and political changes in Iran.

A combination of security guarantees, economic benefits, support for the right to peaceful nuclear technology and diplomatic negotiations create better chance of putting Iran back on the path of nonproliferation than any other mechanisms. US views of Iran will be difficult to change because of the anti-American rhetoric of the ruling Iranian clergy and the strong pro-Israeli voice in the United States (Gordon 2001). Furthermore, any Iranian steps to meet US concerns will be difficult to measure. A great deal of baggage and wealth of accumulated misperceptions and misunderstanding on both sides have built up over the past 27 years. As such, both countries confront a hard way in opening new relations. Constant dialogue at the civilian level should be encouraged and expanded to overcome several decades of suspicion. In addition, academic, sports and religious exchanges should take place.

Iran is convinced that the United States deliberately shot down the Iranian civil aircraft in 1986. Iran is embittered over American support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. It is convinced the US military presence in the Persian Gulf is directed primarily against Iran. Iran also believes the US is determined to establish its permanent hegemonic presence in the Persian Gulf at all costs and to exclude Iran from taking on an appropriate role in the region. The US and its allies should do what they can to diminish Iran's sense of insecurity and encourage a viable security arrangement in the Persian Gulf in tandem with the United Nations programs. Confidence-building measures, such as a guarantee of Iran's integrity or acknowledgement of constructive conflict management role in the region, would achieve a

lot more than years or even decades of sanctions. To achieve this, the US should recognize Iran's important role in providing regional stability as demonstrated by its cordial relations with the government of Kabul and its endorsement of the interim government in Baghdad.

Iran's policy-makers have failed up till now in recognizing international conditions and the country's place in the hierarchy of world power. The regional power of Iran will be retained if it can solve its own problems at the national level and has a stable position with a functioning government of a nation. Domestic political stability is a pre-condition for consensus-making in the area of foreign policy. Iran's government should plan to promote human rights programs and public living standards. With improved domestic policies, Iran would be able to bargain strongly in the international arena.

5. CONCLUSION

The Islamic Republic of Iran has attempted to make a distinction between terrorist actions and freedom movements in declaring its foreign policy, criticizing the whole Western countries, especially the US, for their two-faced policies regarding human rights, terrorism and violence. Similar to many Islamic and developing countries, Iran has demanded a clear condemnation of all violent policies in the global arena, specifically Israel's policies in the occupied territories. Iran demands the US to refrain from providing arms, military training, and blind diplomatic assistance to Israel that resorts to violence, including terrorism with an eye to advancing its cause in the Middle East, and to denounce violence and acts of terrorism when they occur.

Iran demands Washington's full cooperation with many Islamic countries to evade the Jewish lobby and to endorse the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Iranian leaders criticize the peace process in the Middle East as unjust and unfair. In their viewpoint, the first step is to recognize the Palestinian right to have their own country without which all attempts at a peaceful settlement in the Middle East would be counterproductive. It seems that Iran is not alone in the international society. Iran's independent policies enjoy many supportive voices in criticizing American unilateral and interventionist behavior in global politics. In their view, not only does the US military intervention stand in the way of resolving problems of international terrorism, but it also adds new dimensions to this entity. In combating terrorism, the international community needs to investigate its roots and background. In response to American accusations regarding Iran's violation of peace process in the Middle East, Tehran emphasizes Israel's aggressive and violent actions in occupied territories and believes US unilateral support of Israel's policies presents more risk to constructing peace in the region.

The US policymakers have relied too heavily on President Khatami and his reformist allies in Iranian politics ignoring its main leader and his supporters. The US is overestimating the Western kind of democratic movement in Iran. It is hard to believe that a popular uprising against the regime lies around the corner. Drawing analogies from the situation that existed in the 1970s are misleading. Unlike the Shah's regime, the current regime enjoys genuine support from significant sectors of the population, including some of those who strongly oppose it. Meanwhile, it should be noted that there is no big difference between conservatives and progressives regarding foreign policy issues. It means that the US should seek ways to reach out to various Iranian political constituencies both within and outside the regime and intensify people-to-people contacts.

For the past 27 years, the policy of confrontation has been futile. It seems that establishing a cooperative framework on issues of mutual interests, especially on non-political ones, will be productive. The two countries may intensify people-to-people exchange, including cultural academic, athletic and political ones. The US may encourage Iran to make practical contributions to peacemaking efforts along the lines of its activity in UN non-proliferation committees, Iraq and Afghanistan crises. They may develop and fund joint programs to promote small and medium-sized private enterprises, strengthen democratic structures and civil society at communal level, particularly in areas deemed less politically sensitive such as urban development, traffic and deforestation. The US should withdraw its opposition to Iran entering negotiations aimed at joining the World Trade Organization so as to encourage such kinds of economic reforms. The US should refrain from offensive behaviors towards the Iranians such as finger-printing in its airports.

The Iranian image of the US is inseparable from Washington's policy towards the Islamic World and its global politics. The US needs a better understanding of Islamic societies and it should distinguish Islam from terrorism and abandon double-standard policies regarding issues such as human rights. As long as the US follows a unilateral support of Israel, it can not expect to improve its image in Iran and in the rest of the Islamic countries.

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