

Iran and the US: Current Situation and Future Prospects

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Iran-US relations have been poor since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. All efforts to improve the relations have been frustrated. A rapprochement seems highly unlikely, especially, due to the Iranian nuclear program. Tehran has rejected such accusations and emphasized that their nuclear program is intended for civilian purposes. This paper examines the main claims and counter claims between Iran and the US, especially over terrorism-related issues. It argues that the US should revise its foreign policy, from aggressive and arrogant tactics to a policy of engagement and face-to-face negotiations. This paper emphasizes that the continuations of hard line policies, such as sanctions and war, against Iran would be counterproductive and will throw the whole region in turmoil.

Keywords: *Iran' Foreign Policy, US Foreign Policy, Iran' Nuclear Program, Afghanistan Issue, Iran-US Relations, Islamic Revolution in Iran*

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, antagonism and mutual suspicion have characterized the relations between Iran and the US. Indeed, for almost two decades, the US has considered Iran the most active sponsor of international terrorism. In May 2002, the US Department of State claimed that Iran "remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism." Tehran and Washington have not had diplomatic relations for more than two decades. Accordingly, US diplomatic interests in Iran are represented by Switzerland, and the Iranian interest section in Washington is located in the embassy of Pakistan. The two countries also communicate on the sideline of multilateral form. As the war in Iraq appeared inevitable, it seemed highly probable that Tehran-Washington contacts would increase, and there was some optimism that these contacts would result in a warming of bilateral relations.

Iranian officials categorically deny the American accusations and contend that their country is a victim, and not a sponsor, of international terrorism. Meanwhile, in contrast to most Islamic countries in the Middle-East, Iran enjoys a viable, indigenous, democratic movement, which began from the Constitutional Movement a century ago. Most elements of Iran's political movement and most Iranian population see the United States as an arrogant power who betrayed Iranians in Mossadeq national movement. They see the US as a potential threat, who may repeat the history again, in particular, with regard to their Islamic Revolution.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In the first section, I provide a conceptual framework of US foreign policy to draw the essential framework for American impacts of international politics. US foreign policy has been gradually changing. The deeply-held American values of freedom, self-determination, and human rights of others have become subordinated to national interests. It seems that the principles of current US foreign policy are plagued with inconsistencies, selectivity, and short-sightedness that are bound to hurt America and American interests in the long run.

1. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: US FOREIGN POLICY

In order to analyze any aspect of Iran-US relations, it is of utmost importance to refer to the essential framework for American foreign policy. It should be mentioned that over the past five decades since Truman made his declaration of the fundamentals of US foreign policy, the principles continued to shift from one based on freedom and self-government, to principles concerned mainly with US economic and geopolitical interests. US foreign policy has been practiced in effects by three cardinal principles:

1. US should promote freedom and democracy in other regions of the world, since this is the only defensible moral ground on which the projection of US military power can be justified.
2. US moral concerns for freedom and democracy must be curtailed by the national interests of the US, which fundamentally take the form of economic and geopolitical US concerns.
3. To harmonize principles 1 and 2, the US must adopt the principles of selective engagement which align US moral to economic concerns, and hence subordinate the former to the latter.

Given the above principles, the US foreign policy subordinates the universal principles of right and justice to the national interests of the US, and which refuses the UN and its resolutions to a convenient instrument to be invoked only when it serves the US interests. In this regard, the US strategy for counteracting international terrorism and building international security lacks both coherence and credibility for implementing America's best values. It seems that the Bush administration rarely understands the flashpoints and firebreaks in American-Islamic relations. While one strand of policy projects official messages of goodwill toward Muslims and seeks to advertise American values through public diplomacy, the Bush administration has mostly redressed problems of international terrorism and weapons proliferations unilaterally, through intimidation and projection of military power.

It can be argued that where many Americans see policies animated by ideological consistency and even moral clarity, Muslims see double standards and moral bankruptcy. The resulting perceptual gap and demonstrable hardship experienced by Palestinians and Iraqis under occupation has fed a deep cynicism about American policies. Therefore, the US concerns about Iran's atomic weapons is not regarded as credible given the past US indifference to use weapons of mass destruction against Iranians and Kurds, not to mention the way the US non-proliferation agenda seems driven more by power politics and a containment policy of selective proliferation than by any consistent set of principles. In light of these perceptions, the US should not be surprised that most Middle Easterners view the war to 'liberate' Iraq as actually a campaign to subjugate Arabs and Muslims, within the well-established traditions of Western Imperialism. From a Muslim standpoint, official American pronouncement of respect for Islam is much easier to explain away than the policies that instead manifest either a deliberate bias or an inability to comprehend the needs, aspirations, and fears of others (Lawrence 1998: 32-35). It is politically expedient for American leaders to profess respect of Islam and for Muslim values. An official pronouncement of intolerance in the wake of September 11 would legitimize violence against Arab and Muslim Americans, with significant consequences for US interests.

It seems that in many parts of the world, and particularly in the Middle-East, America is associated not with freedom and democracy but with suppressive and autocratic regimes; for the last fifty years, the successive US governments have stood behind self-appointed leaders, providing them with financial and military support, as well as security and political advice. Far from being the guardian of freedom and democracy, the US is often seen as the powerful supporter behind military regimes and brutal dictators. One clear example is the US involvement in Iran. The CIA was directly involved in engineering the military coup that removed the democratic nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, and installed Mohammad Reza Shah's regime in Iran in 1954' (Gasiowski 1991: 33-73).

Despite his abuse of civil liberties of his people, and his extensive use of state security forces to suppress critics and opposition forces, the Shah continued to receive the blessing of American leaders. It is interesting to know that President Carter, who insisted that the US foreign policy must be informed by American concerns over human rights, praised the Shah during a visit shortly before the latter was ousted by Iranian people during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The US later took an active part in arming Saddam Hussein in a bid to topple the Islamic revolutionary government in Tehran. To ensure the cooperation of the Iraqi military government, the Reagan administration kept silent when Saddam used chemical weapons against Iranians as well as against the Kurdish opposition in Northern Iraq. It was only when the belligerent Saddam turned in newly acquired military strength against the oil rich Persian Gulf countries that he was declared a renegade. America's commitment to freedom and democracy has hardly had any bearings on the US foreign policies towards Iraq and Iran. To the Iraqis and Iranians, the US appears as a technologically-advanced military power, unrestrained by moral obligations in its pursuit of its own self interests (Houman, 1998:13-27).

As an example, the failure of the successive US administration to project clear and sustained interests in freedom and democracy can be seen in the US policy vis-à-vis the Israel-Palestinian conflict. For decades, Arabs and Muslims watched the Israeli government expand its territories at the expense of its Arab neighbors. Israel was allowed to occupy the West Bank and Gaza, the Golan Heights and Southern Lebanon with the tacit approval and blessing, and occasionally with the open support, of the US government, in spite of the successive UN resolutions and clear violation of international law. America is resented in many parts of the world for its willingness to support authoritarian and corrupt regimes as long as they advance America's economic and strategic interests. Those who are using terror against America are the product of political repression. They are products of Middle Eastern regimes befriended by the US but who have little respect for freedom and democracy. It is indeed a sad but true reality that many prefer to ignore. The so-called free and democratic America has been nurturing repression abroad. To acknowledge this fact is the first step to deal with the roots of terrorism.

Terrorism must be clearly defined, and systematically confronted. If terrorism is defined as the use of violence against unarmed civilians, then we have to ensure that all individuals and organizations that fit this description, regardless of their positioning and loyalty, are identified as such. The US government has not been consistent in identifying terrorist acts. The US government did not recognize the Russian brutal attacks against Chechnya, and its use of disproportionate force of flattens the Chechen capital for what it is, and for what it represents. Similarly, the Israeli incursion into Lebanon and Israel's shelling of Beirut and other civilian targets, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths, did not receive the moral

condemnation it deserves. Israel continues to use excessive military force to suppress an essentially civilian uprising against its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

US foreign policy that aligns American support behind tyrants and dictators, and against the legitimate aspirations of popular movements pursuing national independence or democratic rule, is informed by notions and principles advanced by political realists. That is, they are informed by the nationalist political culture of the nineteenth century Europe. The political realist approach to international politics insists that national leaders have one paramount obligation, i.e. advancing the national interests of their nations, often defined in economic or geographical terms. Political realists justify this position by pointing out that in the absence of any international law that can be enforced by a central authority, nations are justified in enforcing their own interests. To do otherwise, political realists stress, is to give unprincipled foreign powers the opportunity to grow unchecked.

US economic and geopolitical interests must not be placed over and above the right of other nations to live life of freedom and dignity. In order to fight effectively with terrorism, it must be carried according to fair rules, and must aim at the real target. Effective confrontation with terrorism requires a clear understanding of the sources of anger and frustration that lies at the roots of global terrorism and a clear definition of what constitutes a terrorist act. Furthermore, the members of international community need a "clear vision of a global society based on the universal principles of equal freedom and mutual respect" (Merari 1993: 213-251).

A war on terrorism that employs moral themes but advances the narrow interests of a privileged few can bring more evil than good, as it is likely to result in harming innocent bystanders.

In the second section of the paper I examine the US-Iran relations as a case study. It argues that different administrations in the US adopted a similar policy of confrontation with Iran. This policy led to more turmoil and instability in the region and it was counterproductive for American themselves. Supporting Saddam Hussein led to more wars and violence in the Persian Gulf region.

2. A CASE STUDY: THE US AND ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), the US policy makers wanted to maintain relations with Iran, because of their economic, political and military interests. But after the Mohammad Reza Shah's fall, US relations with Iran were never normalized and, on the contrary, changed to increased anti-Americanism (Hart 1995:23-25). The Carter Administration saw a distinction between the Iranian leaders, who were divided into moderates and radicals, and it relied only on the moderates in Bazargan government, thereby isolating itself from the revolution by ignoring the main Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. On the other side, the moderates themselves were not satisfied with the US policy towards Iran, which they interpreted as a game of "wait and see". In this regard, US relations with Iran were never normalized, and to the contrary, changed into increased anti-Americanism (Sick 1989: 14-63).

Meanwhile there were some events which could be interpreted as clear US hostility toward Iran, such as non-recognition of the new regime, the Elghnian case, CIA intervention in Iranian internal affairs, and finally the admission of Shah to the US. All of these together with the policy failures of the US in Iran led the revolutionaries to react, most notably by the

embassy takeover. The hostage crisis led to the collapse of the moderate government of Bazargan, while the US suffered loss of prestige and the President himself lost the presidential election campaign. With the US and other Western powers condemnation and blockade against Iran, the revolution remained in deep international political isolation. This situation was a very crucial phenomenon in the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. It seems that the US was not prepared to recognize the failures of its past policies in Iran, the policies which can be partially interpreted as the roots of anti-American feelings in Iran, such as the 1953 CIA-engineered coup against the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and its long support of the unpopular regime of the Mohammad Reza Shah. With strong support for the unpopular regime of the Shah and its different governments including the military one, "who were responsible for killing thousands of Iranian people during the Islamic Revolution" (Rubin 1980: 32-45).

As the war with Iran dragged on and Iraq proved unable to win or even to stop it, the US supported Baghdad. Iraq on the defensive position could no longer keep a regional primacy and no longer opposed US intervention in the area. Indeed, Iraq tacitly welcomed an American presence to block the dominant regional state-Iran. To Iraq, a closer relationship with the US gave Baghdad access to loans, food and agriculture technology, boosted its war policy, opened cooperation with the US intelligence agencies. The US also used its influence to "exert pressure on its allies to stop arms supplies to Iran and to discourage them from buying Iranian oil." The US was able to encourage its allies in the region, to support and finance Iraq against Iran (Murphy 1993: 13).

US policies towards Iran during the Iran-Iraq war raised the level of antagonism between these two countries. This antagonism toward Iran mainly was a consequence of "American unwillingness" to recognize the new situation in Iran after the 1979 revolution (Sick 1995: 31-32). During the war, the US provided a poor framework for conflict resolution. US help to Saddam Hussein during the eight years war contributed greatly to more polarization and animosity in the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile the potential for political instability remained high in the region. Powerful Saddam invaded and occupied Kuwait, leading to more disturbances in the region. During Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, US-led coalition forces ousted Saddam forces, but decided to keep him in power and to impose an economic embargo on Iraq; later, it finally invaded Iraq and occupied its territories. All these American policies brought about a human disaster of great magnitude. For over a decade, the people of the Middle-East, and many humanitarian workers and human right activists, had to watch in horror as hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people were malnourished, wounded and killed. US policies fueled an already explosive situation in the Persian Gulf, contributing greatly to the militarization of the region.

In the next section we consider how both Democrats and Republicans in the US have adopted the same policy of confrontation with Iran. In other words there is no big difference in US administration's policy regarding Iran.

3. AN ASSESSMENT: US DEMOCRATS & REPUBLICAN ADMINISTRATIONS AND IRAN

Both the Democrat and Republic administrations mainly adopted similar policies of confrontation regarding Iran. This means that, basically, there is no drastic difference among the approaches of Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton and Bush Jr. Administrations regarding Iran. All

of them followed the same line of policy of confrontation. To clarify this issue I provide below a quick recap of US-Iran records of interactions after the Islamic Revolution.

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, the US relations with Iran were never normalized, and, on the contrary, changed into increased anti Americanism. Meanwhile, Democrats in Carter administration relied only on the moderates in Bazargan government, isolating themselves from the revolution. Meanwhile, Democrats followed specific policies which could be interpreted as clear US hostility towards Iran, such as non-recognition of the new regime, the Elghanian Case, CIA intervention in Iranian internal affairs, and finally the admission of Shah to the US. Democrats adopted hard-line policy after the revolution, breeding more extremism in Iran' (Simbar 2006: 76).

During the Republic administration, President Reagan followed the same policy of confrontation. Saddam Hussein invaded Iran. The US developed a series of policies designed to halt an Iranian victory. The US supported Iraq diplomatically, militarily and economically. After the Iran-Contra scandal, Reagan Administration 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 of 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 resolution in the Security Council favorable to Iraq. The 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 1990 (Simbar 2006: 77-78).

The same hard-line policies continued in the succeeding administration. These policies made the improvement in US-Iran bilateral relations 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 US had been banned. In 1995, President Clinton issued the Executive Order 12957, banning the US investment in Iran's energy sector, which was followed by many other bans. These continued US hostilities have largely benefited the hard liners in Iran who prefer confrontation as a way of the crisis.

During the last years, Bush administration, as a Republican administration followed the same policy of confrontation. Bush administration exerted enormous pressure to limit Iran's nuclear programs and continued to implement different economic and military bans on Iran. The threat of military invasion against Iran was used many times by Bush administration to confront Iranian regional ambitions.

In the following section I mainly look at the issues of conflict and debate between Iran and the US. They include: Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran's nuclear programs, Afghanistan issue, Iraq's occupation and terrorism.

4. US AND IRAN: CLAIMS AND DENIALS

4.1. Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Middle-East is now in a state of flux in both diplomatic and strategic contexts. Much diplomatic efforts have been put into the peace process to reach a détente between the parties. Yet, both contexts are affected by the developments outside the pure inter-state Arab-Israeli

relationship, such as proliferation of nuclear weapons and missiles, as well as surge in the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism. Under the existing conditions and circumstances, the best the states in the region can aspire to be the establishment of a security regime (Philip 1994: 11-26).

During Pahlavi regime, Iran had close relations with Israel. This relationship expanded much “beyond security issues” and included political and economic interests (Rouhollah, K. Ramazani, 1989:45-63). This close cooperation between Tehran and Tel Aviv was one of the reasons that contributed to the toppling of the Shah and the establishment of the new regime in Tehran. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran declared Israel as Iran’s enemy and hostility to Israel has become a central part in the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic (Khomeini 1981:59-63). Iran does not recognize Israel and sees it as “occupying Muslim land and oppressing Muslim people.” Accordingly, Iran has supported anti-Israeli organizations such as Hezbollah (Gauette 2003: 12).

The accusations brought against Iran, particularly by the US, are different. In fact, there appears to be no strong evidence that show any kind of relationship between Iranian government and international terrorism. Today, a major part of accusation brought against Iran relates to its support of the radical anti-Israeli groups in Palestine. Iran claims its support of Palestinian cause has only been of moral nature; and everybody should differentiate between terrorism and resistance against occupation. Of course, killing innocent civilians is not acceptable under any condition, but operation conducted by Palestinians can be evaluated as an intrinsic right of legitimate defense, self defense, right to obtain independence and autonomy and right of self-determination (Quandt 1993: 29-34).

On the other hand, many times the Iran’s officials have pointed out the possibility that the US itself is the promoter of terrorism. They claim that American politicians use terrorism as an excuse for intervention. They want to employ terrorism as a tool to perpetuate domination over world affairs. Peaceful and freedom loving countries of the world have been falling victim to American machinations one after the other. The old policy of ‘divide and rule’ continues even today. When the US tries to create conditions of friction in the fraternity of the peace-loving nations and then tries to resolve the issue and while resolving that, it tries to establish itself as the master of destiny of the Third World.

Tehran believes the wrong approaches of the US in countering terrorist acts have made the world insecure. Iran’s then Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said “unfortunately, every day we observe explosion and killings in the world and this is due to the wrong and childish approaches of the US and their persistence in their wrong policy in fighting terrorism.” He added that “the Islamic Republic of Iran strongly condemns the explosions in Sharm el-Sheikh and extends sympathy to their victims. We consider restoring to killing in order to achieve objectives as totally wrong.” He recommended the Western countries to take care not to treat Muslims harshly due to these explosions because “these things have nothing to do with Muslims.” Asefi considered harsh treatment towards the followers of other religions and putting Muslims under pressure as rendering more services to terrorism, adding such acts sow the seeds of hatred.” He added that “the US should revise its approach in the campaign against terrorism and avoid dual approaches; it should stretch its hands towards the international community for a collective campaign against terrorism” (IRNA, 2006: 2).

He added that “their divisive politics leads to separation of brothers; one is enslaved by the superpower while the other countries try to linger in the shadows. Finally both fall victim to this international negative influence. This fate of doom and destruction is not reserved

only for the enemies of the US; it also is the final address of its friends. So, no country in the world has the right to define terrorism in the international affairs. Some can find the greater example of terrorism in humiliation of Iraqi nationals inside Iraqi jails in the hands of foreign troops from the US". These actions were condemned by all the nations in the world barring the few immediate allies of Washington in its 'War on Terror'; Asefi emphasized (IRNA, 2006: 2).

Iran raises two particular arguments with regard to terrorism. First, it is essential to distinguish between terrorism- the illegitimate use of force by states and guerrillas- and the legitimate use of force- to repel invasion and oppression. Accordingly, Iran views "the activities of Hezbollah in Lebanon and of armed groups in the West Bank and Gaza along the latter" (Rajaei 1999: 16-19).

Meanwhile, Iran sees itself as a victim of terrorism after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Tehran confirms its sympathy toward both Hamas and al-Jihad; but it denies financial or any other form of support to these organizations (IRNA, 2005: 1). The Iranian government does not deny its close ties with Hezbollah and the efforts to liberate southern Lebanon from the Israeli occupation. This suggests that in case of an Israeli withdrawal the need for military resistance would come to an end (IRNA, 2005: 2).

The Iranian position on Arab-Israeli conflict is understood very differently in Washington. The US and Israel are concerned about Iran's vocal opposition to Arab-Israeli peace process, for this implies that Tehran does not want compromise and intends Israel's destruction instead. The Iranians, though, claim that the Iranian government including its Supreme Leader, have made clear statements indicating that Tehran will accept agreement that the Palestinian themselves will accept.

On the other hand, Iran, as a leading player in the Islamic World, feels obliged to play its role in defending the right of Palestinian people. However, in dealing with radical groups which are active in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran has urged them to adopt a more moderate position. Iran has openly called on Hezbollah to display prudence and self-resistance to prevent Israel from finding a pretext to attack Lebanon again. Despite some hard-line anti-Israeli statements made by a group of radicals inside Iranian domestic political system, its official stance is not very much different from some official positions which are expressed publicly or privately in the Islamic world. Iran has repeatedly stated that it would accept any settlement that is satisfactory to the Palestinians and that it will not try to impose its views by force. In fact, in defending the right of Palestinians, Iran implements its job as a leading Islamic country. Fierce opposition to Israeli occupation is a touchstone of principles advocated by the Islamic Republic of Iran and undoubtedly in the Iranian view, there is a difference between terrorism and struggle for liberation.

It is clear that the alleged Iranian support of terrorist organization is not the sole reason for violence in Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, and other parts of the world. No body can believe that Tehran is the central capital of terrorism in the world and should be blamed for the many violent incidents that occur across the Islamic World. Instead, some other reasons, such as religious and political conflicts as well as socioeconomic inequality present a more viable explanation for violence than an Iranian involvement. It seems that the US policy on terrorism lacks consensus, clear definition and consistency.

Meanwhile, the two US powerful domestic political groups influence the US support for Israel: the Jewish Americans and a coalition of evangelical Christian groups that strongly support Israel for religious reasons. In recent years, they have come to be known as the Zionist Christians. They believe that Israel must annex the occupied territories and create the

biblical Israel. The substantial political power of these two groups in the US congress and the White House have prevented the US from putting any significant pressure on Israel to end the occupation of West Bank and Gaza. As a result, the Arab World has come to see the US as being supportive of Israel's occupation.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the continuous support for Israel's occupation has had many adverse consequences for the US's economic interests and security. It has also imposed a noticeable financial burden on the US taxpayers. Every year, the US pays large amounts of economic and financial aid to Israel, Egypt and Jordan in order to preserve the partial peace. A comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world would allow the US to significantly reduce the burden of these strategic aid programs.

4.2. Iran's Nuclear Programs

The opponents of the US engagement with Iran further argue that opening direct talks would confer legitimacy on Iran's leaders who aside from their suspected desire to obtain nuclear weapons, deny Israel's right to exist, support terrorist groups and lack support among their own people. It seems that while Iran will have the capability to launch a nuclear warhead against Israel or the US interests, it will have no incentive to do so because such an attack will certainly lead to a massive military/nuclear response by Israel and the US and many other countries; it will be next to impossible for Iran to facilitate nuclear terrorist attack (Yaphe 2005:38)

The US, Israel and other Western powers have claimed that Iran works for obtaining nuclear weapons capability. Tehran officially denied these claims and declared that its nuclear plants are for energy purposes and not for military ones. These claims and denials have been more intensified since the early 2000s with some more nuclear activities by Iran. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and European Union (EU) have engaged in lengthy talks with Iran to verify adherence to its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments. In short, the Iranian case represents one of the most serious challenges to the non-proliferation regime (Nye 2006:8).

The US has declared that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, it will pose a threat to the US and Israel. Based on this scenario, Iran will find the capability to attack Israel and US military bases in the Middle-East with nuclear missiles. Furthermore, in a more dangerous scenario, the US believes, Iran might provide nuclear materials to Islamic militants that are fighting against Israel and the US (Bowen Kidd 2004, 257-274). Moreover, Iran can use its nuclear power as deterrence against external invasion. This deterrence will enable Iran to play a more active role in the Middle-East and pose a challenge to the US policies in the region. Iran can assist Islamic groups who are opposed to the presence of US in the region.

Since either a direct nuclear attack against the US or any of its allies, or involvement in nuclear terrorism would lead to massive retaliation, it is fair to argue that a nuclear Iran will not dare to pursue either one. Instead, it will only be able to use its nuclear capability for deterrence and bargaining purposes. In other words, Iran's nuclear power will alter the balance of power in the region but will not necessarily make it less stable. When China developed nuclear weapons, the West was worried that it will threaten its neighbors and the risk of nuclear conflict will increase, but this concern proved unfounded. China has maintained a small nuclear arsenal for the past four decades and has used it for deterrence purposes only. Indeed, China has been involved in far less conflict after becoming a nuclear power.

The West was even more concerned when Pakistan tested its first nuclear bomb in 1988. Pakistan's political system has been less stable than China in the past three decades. The only major contribution of nuclear weapons to Pakistan's security is that it has created a more equal balance of power between India and Pakistan. As a result, both countries have come to the conclusion that they can not afford to engage in another major war. The public opinion in both countries is now better prepared for peace negotiations than ever before and this is true despite the fact that the Kashmir disputes remain unresolved.

Tehran insists it has the right to "a peaceful nuclear energy program" (IRNA, 2007), although the US suspects it is trying to develop atomic weapons (Kharrazi 2005: 25-30). In a letter to Mr. Annan, Iran's ambassador to the UN criticized US President George W. Bush, who has refused to rule out even a nuclear strike on Iranian targets. US rhetoric amounted to "illegitimate and open threats to use force against the Islamic Republic of Iran," the letter said. "These are in obvious contravention of international rules and principles of the United Nations.

It is often said in the West that millions of Iranians, even those who are opposed to their government, believe that their country is entitled to a civilian nuclear program. The Iranian government propaganda certainly creates this impression. But in reality the picture is more complex. There is no doubt that many people passionately support the program. Some people even go further and say Iran is entitled to nuclear weapons, even though the country has committed itself under the Non-Proliferation Treaty not to develop such weapons. Iranian government gains support on the nuclear program for a variety of reasons. Regionally, some argue, Iran is surrounded by nuclear powers such as Pakistan, India, and Russia. Why should Iran be denied? Some complain about double standards in the Western foreign policy. They ask why the West is silent on Israel, which is already a nuclear armed power. Some Iranians have accepted the government line that the West is behaving as it did during colonial times and is depriving a developing country of the possibility of technological progress. "Iranians are highly nationalists and for many of them the nuclear issue has become a matter of national pride" (*BBC News*, 2006).

The Iranian officials expressed little confidence in the international community, as several foreign companies either rejected or withdraws from commercial deals they signed with Iranian nuclear authorities under political pressure from Washington. Moreover, Iran has a bitter experience during eight years of war with Iraq (IRNA 2006: 3) The Iranians never forgot that foreign powers did nothing when Saddam Hussein imposed a war on them, attacked them by chemical weapons and missiles but the foreign powers did nothing about it. From this experience, they have learned that they should not expect assistance from foreigners and therefore, they should develop their own national military, as well as conventional and non-conventional capabilities. In the aftermath of the war with Iraq, the Iranian leadership was determined to end the country's vulnerability and to build their capabilities (Kharrazi 2005: 25-30).

Iran's Foreign Ministry, Manouchehr Mottaki, said "US is accusing Iran and other Islamic states of ill-intention, whereas, it has got black records in terms of using nuclear weapons (against Japan), possessing nuclear arsenals, a discriminatory approach to different nations and violation of their rights, forging scientific apartheid and attempts to dominate energy resources of developing states. So, the US has no jurisdiction for judgment in the international community." He said "that the Islamic Republic of Iran honors its commitment to the international community and has made constructive cooperation to reinforce regional and international peace and stability" (Keyhan 2006: 12).

It should be mentioned that Tehran has invested substantial resources in its nuclear program. When Iran has definitely used foreign technology and materials, it developed an indigenous and national nuclear expertise. This big achievement cannot be taken away from Iran. Iran would keep some level of nuclear infrastructure and would never give up its nuclear capabilities. Any program by great powers to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions will have to address its demands and security concerns. Hard line policies would be counter-productive and add new dimensions to the critical situation in the region.

Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability started in the mid-1980s in response to Iraq's non-conventional attacks and was essentially for defensive deterrents. Meanwhile, Israel and the US would not hesitate to use their conventional and non-conventional military power to deter such a threat. Furthermore, if we put rhetoric aside, Iran's tendency in foreign policy has been cautious and less adventurous; Tehran tries to place priority on its national interests rather than its ideological long-term objectives. In short, launching a nuclear invasion on the US or Israel does not seem to be a motive for Iran's nuclear plans. Rather, deterring a US intervention in Iran's internal affairs and keeping the national security and the Islamic regime seem as more realistic motives.

4.3. Afghanistan Issue

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 was 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.

Despite these claims and counterclaims, the September 11 terrorist attacks and the US military response have introduced new parameters in the relations between Washington and Tehran. The two nations found themselves on the same side in war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Kabul (*The New York Times* 2001: 3).

Nevertheless, Tehran claimed that it would not help the US if it acted against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan, "America's expansionist policies were the cause of recent developments," Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said. According to the Iranian Leader, the US wants to establish itself in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the subcontinent under the pretext of establishing security. The US also intends to "settle scores with anyone who defends the oppressed people of Palestine". Accordingly, the US and Iran, worked together to create and install an interim government in Afghanistan. Tehran took several steps in support of destroying Al Qaeda and the Taliban. These include "offering to conduct search-and-rescue mission for downed US pilots in Afghanistan", plying a key role in forming a government in Kabul led by Hamed Karzai, and promising substantial foreign aid to help rebuilding Afghanistan (IRNA 2002: 4).

The American's decision to eliminate Al Qaeda and Taliban in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks served major Iranian strategic and economic goals. The removal of the Taliban and establishment of a new government led by Hamed Karzai means that Iran has a friendly government on its eastern border. Meanwhile, political stability in Afghanistan has facilitated the return of hundreds of thousands of Afghani refugees from Iran. Furthermore, a strong central authority in Kabul would likely stop or reduce the production of opium and other illegal drugs. In the late 1990s, thousands of Iranians were killed fighting drug traffickers along the border with Afghanistan. Finally, the American

military campaign in Afghanistan has terminated the Taliban support to the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK). This group enjoyed support from the Islamic Republic's enemies including Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan.

Another point which has been advanced by the US is the cooperation between Iran and Al-Qaeda operatives to take refuge within its territory and facilitated the passage of them through the country. But the fact is that the very lengthy border between Iran and Afghanistan, and Iran and Pakistan has made it very difficult to control. However, the government has managed to detain many fugitives and has extradited them to their countries of origin.

Here, the interesting point is that deep ideological differences between Iran and Al-Qaeda make any connection between them an impossible thing. As mentioned earlier, Al-Qaeda advocates a deviated interpretation of Islam mixed with politics. This interpretation is much different to the mainstream Islamic teachings and is devised for certain political purposes. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, its main supporters, are radical Sunni groups having fundamental differences with Shia groups.

The reaction made by Iran to the September 11 attack is very significant. In sharp contrast to much of the Arab world's concealed happiness that the US had received a terrible blow, Iran responded with official statements of condolences. Even during the US attack on Afghanistan, despite its opposition to military action, cooperated with coalition forces on issues such as humanitarian relief, search and rescue and other practical matters. Iran initially condemned the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks against the US, and the Iranian public expressed sympathy for the victims and their families. On the day of attacks, President Khatami said in a statement read out on state television, "I condemn the terrorist operations of hijacking and attacking public places in American cities which have resulted in the death of a large number of defenseless American people. Candle light vigils took place in Tehran, there was a moment of silence before a World Cup qualifying match, and officials signed the book of condolences at the Swiss Embassy, which represents the US interests in Iran (IRNA 2005: 4). Also, after the fall of Taliban government, Iran has actively participated in the Bonn Talks to establish a new interim government in Afghanistan. This behavior even attracted the attention of US officials, but Iran did not receive any appropriate response from the US government.

However, this opportunity has been spoiled by the Americans. By late January 2002, President Bush in State of Union speech labeled Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as part of "axis of evil". Bush said that the American people demanded his administration not allow these three countries to pursue WMD; otherwise, the consequences would be grave. Bush's rhetoric disturbed the situation between the two countries (Baker and Linzer 2005: 13). Predictably, Iranian leaders reacted angrily to this characterization of their country. Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader described President Bush, as a man "thirsty for human blood" and former Iranian President, Khatami, called Bush's speech "bellicose and insulting." It seems that it would be very hard to accept the President Bush's doctrine, as the term "axis" suggests some kind of alliance between the members, which is not the case between North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. It seems that President Bush has forgotten that it was Baghdad who imposed the eight year war on Iran. Furthermore, Iran has tried to establish a workable framework of confidence building which was broken by harsh policies of the US. In May 2002, the former Iranian President, Khatami, summarized the situation and said "as long as they (the Americans) are threatening, insulting and humiliating us, neither I nor the nation is ready to accept any relations.

The basis for such a policy came, partly, from Bush's new stated doctrine," whoever is not with us is against us, and whoever provides sanctuary for terrorists or supports them, is no different from terrorists." The proliferation of WMD has become the paradigm of US foreign policy following 9/11. Accordingly, three issues placed alongside each other account for the image of Iran as a major threat to Washington: a "rogue government; a support of groups like Hezbollah; and an Iran's so-called pursuit of nuclear weapons."

4.4. Iraq's Occupation

It seems that Tehran welcomed the ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He was a man responsible for an eight-year war (1980-1988) against Iran that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and that forced thousands of Iraqis to become refugees in Iran, used chemical weapons against Iran's Shia Muslim co-religionists in Iraq, and who sponsored a violent Iranian opposition group for approximately two decades. Indeed, the UN Security Council Resolution 598 of July 1988 led to a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, but a formal peace treaty was never signed. Nevertheless, Iraq's freedom placed Iran in an uncomfortable political and strategic position in which it is surrounded on all sides by what it is perceived as a greater enemy than Saddam Hussein-the United States.

The large-scale US military intervention in Iraq is unprecedented in the Middle-East. For the first time, American troops have been directly involved in toppling an Arab regime and bringing a new government. Given the current situation in Iran and the region, it could be said that if the next governments in Baghdad keeps close relations with Washington then Iran would suffer from security threat. With this uncertainty, the Iranians seem to have concluded that they should not take any risks and should be prepared for any upcoming crises.

New, the government in Iraq apologized to Iran(sentence does not make sense??). It acknowledged Saddam Hussein's role in provoking the devastating eight-year war between the two countries in 1980s. In such a situation, it is possible to say that Iran is the country that has benefited most from President Bush's Middle-East policy. The US has eliminated Iran's two neighboring enemies, Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. Although the US army is camped out on Iran's eastern and western borders, it is an exhausted, overstretched army. After a period of time, most military experts even those in the Bush administration believe that a full-bore invasion of Iran would be extremely difficult and very unwise. So, Iran has definitely come to be a major beneficiary of US policy since September 11, 2001. With the exception of military chaos, everything is good for Iran's national interests. The logic of Iran's ascendance is simple. Iran sat back as the US launched expansive wars and defeated Iranian enemies on two of its borders, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran's population is predominantly Shia Muslim, and with Iraq's Shia majority certain to dominate any new Iraqi government, the two nations will share cultural and religious ties that will likely bring the formerly warring neighbors closer.

Before the American's invasion of Iraq, Iran proposed that the Iraqi opposition reconcile with Saddam Hussein while the UN supervised a referendum in Iraq. Tehran described this as the only way to have a peaceful change of government in Baghdad that could preclude a regional war, and Iran emphasized its concern about Iraq's territorial integrity (IRNA 2003: 3). Iran adopted a policy of what it called "active neutrality" in the lead-up to the operation of Iraqi freedom. The Foreign Minister spokesman described this policy in September 2002. "The Islamic Republic of Iran's regional position and national interests necessitate that it

should actively hold talks with all the parties involved to prevent the outbreak of war in the region". Iranian officials consistently opposed unilateral US actions, emphasizing instead their desire that any action should take place within a multilateral framework. Meanwhile, Tehran and Washington were holding clandestine meetings, Iraqi officials were visiting Iran, and Iran was hosting Iraqi opposition meetings.

Active neutrality, which is also referred to as "preventive diplomacy," reflected a cost-benefit analysis by the Iranian foreign policy establishment. Through this policy, Iran hoped to see Iraq peacefully disarmed while it avoided the prospect of complete encirclement by a pro-US security belt" strengthening from Kuwait in the Persian Gulf, through Azerbaijan and Caucasus. This policy and avoiding encirclement would conform to Iran's self-image and desire for prestige. "Two factors have made our position stronger. First is the American attitude, the American behavior. They came to Iraq under the slogan of human rights and democracy, but unfortunately, the Americans could not prove they are sincere in what they are saying. The second was that our behavior in Iraq was very clear, that we are not looking for hegemony", said Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi (IRNA 2006: 3).

The protracted war with insurgents in Iraq has also weakened America's standing in the region. Many people across the Middle-East have begun to embrace Iran's vision of the US as a "Great Satan". America's aim of bringing democracy to the region does not square with what they see happening. Instead, they are convinced that American policy is aimed at controlling the Middle-East's vast oil reserves and subduing both Shia and Sunni Muslims. The changing political reality worries Washington's Arab allies, who complain that the White House ought to engage Iran rather than isolate it. Many say it is the only way to shore up America's influence amid a widespread perception that Bush is waging a war on Islam rather than terror.

However, these gains were not for free; the price was US military presence in several Central Asian states-Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Iran has alarmed by plans for a long term presence of American troops next to its eastern borders. In Iran's perspective, this means that the US is in the process of encircling their country. Iranian officials believe that the US is using terrorism issue as a pretext to establish a long-term presence in Central Asia. The American objective is not to confront terrorism, but rather to enhance and protect US economic and strategic interests.

Iranian officials consistently emphasized their desire to have Iraq's problem resolved in a multilateral forum, and preferably by the UN. There were three reasons for this attitude. The first, and most important, was Iran's reluctance to have US military forces on its borders. The second reason, of almost equal importance, relates to Tehran's unhappiness about the US ability to act unilaterally if it desires to organize an international coalition to support its military actions. The third reason is Iran's role as a Third World and Islamic community leader. If the US could act against a small, undeveloped country such as Afghanistan, then other developing countries, including Iran, could be at risk. These reasons reflect some of the traditional influences in Iranian foreign and security policy, ethnicity, geopolitics, Islamic radicalism, third-worldism, and nationalism. Iran invited for general election in Iraq, believing that election would be the first step towards establishing stability and security in Iraq. With this election, the foreign occupiers should leave the country and nation should be allowed to determine its own destiny (Byman, Chubin, Ehteshami, and Green 2001: 23-44).

Then, the Iranian former President, Mohammad Khatami said that the war in Iraq mainly accounts for the promotion of terrorism and expansionism in the world. He claimed that occupation of Iraq initially aimed to eradicate terrorism and dictatorship in the country.

“However, unfortunately what is going on in Iraq has turned the country into a center of extremist terrorist movements and arrogance; Iraq has turned into a center of terrorist activities and terrorists aim to take revenge of the Iraqi people and the occupiers of the country,” added the former President (IRNA 2004: 3)

Iran’s Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, said that the US is following up interventionist goals under guise of international campaign against terrorism. “It has become clear now that the US war against Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has been nothing more than a lie and the US has been discredited by the world public opinion,” Mottaki said. He added that US has embarked on an old and repetitive game to sow discord among the Islamic nations to press ahead with ominous goals; Washington, following unilateral goals in the international community, has occupied Iraq and supports the Zionist regime which poses threat to the world peace.

5. OTHER ISSUES

Iran accuses the US of adopting a double standard policy toward terrorism, particularly with regard to the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK). This organization was established in the 1960s, in order to resist the Western influence in the Pahlavi regime. The philosophical foundation of this organization has been a mixture of Marxism and Islam. In the 1970s the MEK killed several US Military personnel and civilians working on defense projects in Tehran. In the 1980s, however, the MEK started terrorist operations against the young Iranian government. Iranian security forces prevented their operations and its leader escaped to Iraq, France, and some other countries (IRNA 2005: 3). For almost two decades, the organization has been involved in vigorous attacks against the Iranian state. The US has taken different approaches towards the MEK, supporting it in different occasions as a political means to make pressure on Iran (IRNA 2006: 5).

In early January 2002, in Karin-a affair, again, the US and Israel accused Iran without any tangible documental evidence. This accusation further deteriorated turbulent Iran-US relations. When Afghan issue making hopes for a better perspective for improving the situation; the American deliberately created an atmosphere of hatred and animosity. According to Israeli government, the ship, Karin-a, was carrying fifty tons of weapons which were loaded on the ship near the Iranian island of Kish, just in the Persian Gulf. It was clear that the whole episode further complicated the already tense relations between Washington and Tehran. Iran denied any involvement in smuggling arms to Hamas and described it as another American hegemonic behavior towards Iran (Keyhan 2002: 4).

The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act, which President Bush signed into law in May 2002, also destructed the process of confidence building. This law prohibits the issuance of non-immigrant visas to citizens of the seven countries listed as state sponsors of terrorism by the US Department of State. Iran is one of these countries. Both Iranian government and large numbers of Iranian immigrants protested to the law. Iran declared the law explicitly contradicts the spirit and principles of international conventions and the most basic civil rights of citizens and is another sign of US arrogant and hegemonic behavior against the Iranian people. Many critics asked why the American accused Iran, when none of the 19 hijackers of the US airplanes on September 11 came from Iran. Instead, most of the terrorists came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other countries considered as US allies. Moreover, the law placed immense hardship on the large Iranian-American community. The

immediate family members of approximately one million Iranian Americans will not be able to come for short visits.

The Bush administration has suggested many times the military action against Iran. Alongside this option, another model looks back at American policies toward countries such as Poland during the Cold War, and emphasizes utilizing existing opportunities and engagement of citizens to pour onto the streets to demonstrate against the regime, a method similar also to the one that resulted in downfall of the former Shah of Iran. Other models look at experiences in Chile and Indonesia. In this plan, the main objective is to establish the kind of conditions that force the leadership to abdicate, the main factors being corruption and dictatorship. In this model, what is imagined is that the motive for political change led by students, intellectuals and workers culminates in widespread demonstrations and strikes that result in the system's collapse; following which the leadership resigns due to numerous reasons, but mainly because of security fears.

Americans' threat of using force against Iran is problematic as well. A unilateral American use of force against Iran would likely have disastrous effects on the international security environment. It is doubtful whether a "surgical" air strike could succeed in destroying all of Iran's nuclear assets, while a large-scale invasion and military occupation of the country is widely recognized as unmanageable. Even if American air force succeeded in disrupting for some time Tehran's ability to develop nuclear weapons, Iran could well find others means including military option – to retaliate against Western interests in the region and elsewhere.

Such a unilateral use of force by Washington would find little support within Europe and would further undermine trans-Atlantic relations just as they were recovering from the divisions created by the invasion of Iraq. Russia and China would certainly oppose such a move. Even, close American allies in Asia and Latin America would object to a US military action against Iran under the current circumstances. Fearing the long-term consequences for their security of an even more radicalized Iranian regime, Turkey, Egypt and other nearby countries would have new grounds to pursue their own programs, further undermining the global non proliferation regime.

In the final section of this paper I attempt to draw a picture for Iran-US relation's future prospect. The main objective here is to determine the future challenges and opportunities ahead.

6. IRAN AND THE US: FUTURE PROSPECTS

The international environment within which the Islamic Republic must operate today is very complex and multi-dimensional. The Iranian government cannot isolate itself from the conflict with the US. The Bush administration will continue to be a major challenge for Iran, "especially regarding Iran's nuclear capability and its political stance relative to the US interests in the region" (BBC NEWS 2006).

It seems that Iran has succeeded in turning the American hostility to its advantage. If the US' problems in Iraq lighten, it will be able to place more pressure on Iran. However, exactly what would be Iranian responses is hard to predict, but Iran's possible isolationist or rejectionist policies will not resolve the situation, and continued hostility on the American part aggravates the problems. The Westerners' interests in controlling middle-eastern oil and the Iranians' historical suspicion of foreign powers do not leave much room for international

collaboration around democratic issues in Iran. But in the “modern globalized world, much of the local politics have become global and the international factors play an important role in politics at the national level” (Afrasiabi and Maleki 2003: 225-264).

Iran is a country with a rich culture, historical records and a stable government. These elements will in turn lead to national identity, social stability and a well-placed political culture. A vast land area, rich resources and strategic location impart to Iran a special standing in political calculations and a greater scope to attain a genuine position as a regional power as compared with other countries, like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (Byman, Chubin, Ehteshami, and Green 2001: 23-32).

One of the best options for the two countries is direct negotiations. Face to face talks with Iran would not be unprecedented. It is not as if the Americans and the Iranians have not communicated and in some cases cooperated in the years since the 1979 revolution and the 444-day American hostage crisis. President Reagan and President Clinton each authorized direct contacts with Tehran, although with decidedly mixed results. Even the Bush administration was engaged in an extensive dialogue with the Iranians just a few years ago. In the wake of September 11, a State Department-led negotiation team secured Iran’s cooperation or at least its non-interference with the US invasion of Afghanistan and overthrow of the Taliban.

It seems that the Ahmadinejad’s letter to President Bush may pave the way for future negotiations. In his letter to President Bush, among other things, he claimed that US policies do not conform to the Christian values. Nearly three decades had passed since the leaders of Iran and the US communicated directly. Ahmadinejad wrote “all prophets speak of peace and tranquility-based on monotheism, justice and respect for human dignity”. Ahmadinejad added “Do you not think that if all of us abide by these principles, we can overcome the world’s problems? Will you not accept this invitation?”

The US has largely ruled out direct engagement with Tehran, choosing instead to threaten Tehran with action by the Security Council if the regime refuses to abandon its suspect nuclear activities (Kemp 2001: 109-124). The Iranians, meanwhile, have repeatedly dismissed the Security Council and insisted on their right to enrich uranium, which can be used for peaceful purposes, but is just the first step on the path to the bomb.

Obama’s election as the US president shows the American people’s demand for essential changes in the country’s domestic and foreign policies. It seems that President Obama should abandon the course taken by President Bush. President Obama wants to continue diplomatic efforts with Iran while refraining from discussing the possibility of using military force. He has repeatedly reminded us that he opposes the Bush Administration’s “saber rattling”, arguing that non-military options have not been exhausted. This view is shared by many on the left who either fears that US policies provoke Iran into some sort of action that threatens the US or who believed that military force is never justified.

Nothing over the past five years has been painful for the Iranians. The ineffectiveness of the Security Council has demonstrated that meaningful multilateral sanctions are not likely to be forthcoming, and unilateral sanctions, such as those imposed by the US and separately by the EU, have historically had poor results. Iran will not be easily deterred. Could the world live with a nuclear Iran? Yes, the world has lived with other nuclear powers for decades. In this direction, a diplomatic solution is the preferred outcome.

Negotiations with Iran would address Iran’s increasing regional responsibility, including its nuclear ambitions, its role in stabilizing Iraq, and in disarming Hezbollah in Lebanon. Making progress on these issues serves larger American strategic objectives for regional

stability, especially America's imperative to secure the free flow of energy across Eurasia. Washington must therefore carefully consider the following strategic concerns before doing on any course of action. First, in the Caspian Sea, the US needs Iran to counter Russia, Washington's main rival on the world stage of energy marketing and transportation. The US is interested in the Caspian primarily because Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are major hydrocarbon producers. If the US attacks Iran, it will lose its leverage against Russia, bringing Moscow even closer to Tehran, seriously threatening US interests in Central Asia and Caspian. Also, Iran can foment trouble inside Azerbaijan, which is three-quarters Shia, by exploiting a simmering territorial dispute to weaken Baku's US-friendly government and disrupt American regional operations.

Second, China already imports about fifteen percent of its energy needs from Iran, with which it has had friendly relations for decades. China continues to invest billions of dollars in Iran's energy sector, including developing vast oil concessions and a pipeline network linking the Caspian, the Persian Gulf, and China. Recently, Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation organization, a strategic alliance that brings together China, Russia, and key Central Asian states that aim to limit US influence in the region. Any US threat to Iran may compel Beijing to send troops to protect its energy assets, laying the groundwork for the establishment of permanent Chinese bases in the heart of the US energy compound and raising the specter of an eventual military confrontation between the US and China (King and Fassihi, 2005).

Iran's main political rival in the region, Saudi Arabia, is also the world's largest energy provider. Iran could – if provoked – severely disrupt energy production and export routes with a few missiles, sunken ships, block seaways, damage infrastructure, and, in the long term, Shia uprisings in US-friendly states like Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and even Saudi Arabia. Moreover, any attack would be seriously destabilizing, undermining instruments and confidence-building measures the US has quietly nurtured over many years, such as the Saudi-Iranian security cooperation agreement of 2001, which was crafted precisely to reduce tensions in the Persian Gulf region.

The shortest way from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf is through Iran, The US has no outlet to sell its substantial Caspian production to China, Japan, and other Asian markets besides the long-awaited pipeline under construction through western Afghanistan. Iran's position as a transit state is the only viable alternative if the US is serious about diversifying its energy supply network (Asfour 2006: 7).

It seems that, the sooner the US engages Iran, the sooner it will stabilize Iraq, which has the world's second largest proven oil reserves and an extensive export network between the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean. Iran was the main beneficiary of Saddam's ouster. It provided Iran with inroads into the core of Iraqi social, military, and religious politics. US and Iran's interests converge on the desire for lasting stability in Iraq. This is critical for Washington because a viable Iraq "would secure its position at home and its influence throughout the region. Lebanon's stability is also important to the US energy security. The Tapline, the only Saudi land-link to the Mediterranean, passes through Southern Lebanon and the Golan. Disarming Hezbollah and placing a robust force in the South are important for the US not only to bolster the Lebanese government and to create a wedge between Iran and Syria, but also to protect a vital oil artery. In its dialogue with Iran, only the US can provide the right climate, incentives and guarantee to implement Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's even-point plan and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, agreements that Hezbollah and Iran have in general accepted, leading to a lasting solution

that meets Shia security aspirations in the South. Sincere and tangible efforts by the international community to resolve all territorial and resources grievances among Lebanon, Syria, and Israel in a Madrid-like conference need a constructive relationship between Iran and the US.

The geopolitics of energy marketing and transportation indicate that it is in the best interest for the US to engage Iran. The challenge for the Bush administration is to ensure that its threats against Tehran do not strengthen extremists on both sides. Iran and the US have difficult options to make in the near future to avert a collision detrimental to regional stability (Hass 2005: 44-47). Iran realizes it has much to gain from a serious détente with the US, and the US may have to accept Iran's right to nuclear power in order to achieve its global objectives (Asfour 2006: 8).

A great deal of baggage and wealth of accumulated misperceptions and misunderstanding on both sides have built up over the past twenty-seven years (Abootalebi 2004: 37). To engage Iran, the US should combine security guarantees, economic benefits and support for the right to peaceful nuclear technology. It seems that negotiations create better opportunity of putting Iran back on the path of non-proliferation than any other mechanisms. Any Iranian attempt to meet US concern will be difficult to measure. Meanwhile, any US step to engage Iran would be difficult, because of the anti-American rhetoric of the ruling Iranian clergy and the strong pro-Israeli voice in the US.

The US, since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, has never been ready to accept the reality of changes taking place in Iran. The US adopted a policy of force and sanction against Iran, in order to achieve the goal of changing the Iran's regime and strengthening the opposition groups, who support Western liberal democracy. But it is very hard to believe that a popular uprising against the Islamic Republic of Iran lies around the corner. 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 (Kupchan 2005: 6-7). In comparison with both the recent political history of Iran and the practices in neighboring countries, Iran has taken a significant step forward. Furthermore, the Iranian society is moving onward, where the youth, the intellectuals and women in particular are demonstrating a high degree of mobilization (Abootalebi 2004: 39).

Iran has experienced 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 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. Iran after the revolution, proved to be a success, including the issue of literacy rates. At the end of Pahlavi 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 (Keyhan 2005: 2).

In dealing with Iran, the US should not harbor the illusion that its action, somehow, would radically affect the situation. The US should recognize the right of Iran's people to make autonomous decisions about their future. Hostility in both countries now has become somewhat institutionalized, complicating a rapprochement. In the US, growing recognition that US policies toward Iran have not been successful and indeed are increasingly costly

helps create an opening to change. Meanwhile, economic development is urgently required in Iran to support the necessary and difficult process of political change.

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