

**SEYED HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN**

# IRAN

**AND THE**

# UNITED STATES

**AN INSIDER'S VIEW ON THE FAILED PAST AND THE ROAD TO PEACE**



**FOREWORD BY AMBASSADOR THOMAS PICKERING**

**WITH SHAHIR SHAHIDSALESS**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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**Seyed Hossein Mousavian**  
with  
**Shahir ShahidSaless**

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*Last but not least I want to extend special thanks to Shahir Shahidsaless. His extensive knowledge of international relations, specifically Iran and the US domestic and foreign policy, his analytical skills, as well as his robust theoretical base was paramount to the culmination of this project.*



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## FOREWORD

Hossein Mousavian is a good friend and brings to this book a set of ideas and assessments worth considering even if we are not entirely in agreement. I met him some four years ago or more at a fascinating discussion which he details in the book regarding the Khobar Towers incident in Saudi Arabia. We met again at Princeton on several occasions and later attended conference meetings and platforms together.

We see eye to eye on many matters, particularly the critical importance of finding a way to get the US and Iran speaking together. Hossein's intellectual work during the last five years has been enormously valuable for senior American legislators and senior-level Washington executive branch leaders in gaining a better understanding of Iran. We have had the opportunity to discuss together and think through various approaches to the issue of bringing Iran and the US into closer contact and to finding answers to the matters that divide them, beginning with the nuclear issue.

While many have contributed to that process, it has been the unusual advantage of having Hossein here in the United States which has made its own, important and unique contribution to how Iran views the US. Hossein was able to present insights, points of view, historical details, and frank assessments from an Iranian point of view that helped to broaden horizons, inform policy-makers, and introduce new and useful ideas. Most importantly, he was able to convey thoughts about the Iranian cultural context and ways of thinking about the issues which definitively helped in closing the gap and opening the talks.

Iran-US relations have become the locus of perhaps the most important contribution to foreign affairs in this decade by both countries. The 34-year estrangement has been characterized by, indeed suffused with, mistrust and misunderstanding. Both countries in their own way play a special role in world affairs. Iran is a key regional power, major oil producer, and the leading Islamic state and the major Muslim power where Shia Islam predominates. The future of the Middle East is very much linked to Iran and its role, just as it is linked to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The United States is a major world power. Its security posture, economic strength, and traditional adherence to values and principles which have guided the country since 1776 are

all sources of global and regional influence. Both countries will play a critical role with others in the future of the Middle East.

This book tracks and amplifies the reasons just noted above as to how and why its author has played his own special role in Washington, New York, and in many other cities in this country and Europe in providing a greater understanding of Iran. An Iranian diplomat in Germany, a senior official in Tehran, and a leader in the revolutionary movement to inform and reform Iran, Hossein Mousavian deserves our attention to what he says on key issues. We will not agree with everything, but we should be aware of his views, take them into account, understand where we agree and disagree, and use that information to help shape a constructive path to the future with Iran.

In the few words to follow, I want to do several things to put this book in perspective and share with you some thoughts and ideas which might make going forward by our two countries more understandable and even possible. I've spent over a dozen years looking at the issues posed by the differences between the United States and others with Iran over its nuclear program and other issues. There are several conclusions one can draw that might help with building understanding and progress between Iran and the US.

Direct contacts between the parties to the issue and especially between the United States and Iran are essential. They were, in order to conclude the November 24, 2013 Joint Plan of Action (JPAG). They will be, to reach a conclusion to the current negotiations on a comprehensive agreement.

The parties are separated by over 30 years of mistrust, sporadic contact, and misunderstanding. This book, from the Iranian point of view, seeks to set that right. It is important to know how opposing sides view each other's ideas and intentions.

The reality is that no perfect agreement is achievable. However, the elements are in place to achieve an arrangement in which Iran can pursue a peaceful nuclear program and the US and others have more than reasonable confidence that the program is peaceful and civilian—that is, not being diverted to use in a nuclear weapon.

This takes place against a backdrop of deep suspicion on both sides arising out of the period of mistrust and misunderstanding; on the side of Iran, a sense that the objective is to effect regime change in their country. And there is evidence in the minds of Iranians for that view, as you will read in the pages ahead. On the other hand, a suspicion exists on the part of the United States, fed by some elements raised in the book, and which I will try to summarize, that Iran's real objective is to

construct a nuclear weapon. In part, both of these views are based on some “evidence”—the parties have not been scrupulous in eschewing misstatements and missteps—and in part based on, “that was what I would be doing if I were on the other side” kind of thinking and assessment.

At this stage, two conclusions seem to be possible with regard to this issue. First, the US (and Israeli) intelligence communities seem to agree, and the US has reported each year since 2007, that there has been no Iranian decision to make a nuclear weapon based on what it calls strong evidence. Second, it is clear that Iran has acted in ways that are likely to give it the technology, information, and hardware to proceed in that direction with some confidence should such a decision be made.

Let me now write a word or two now about how I interpret the book and its messages. Mousavian has done a good job in blending what he knows and understands from long service with his government. And he has done so in a way that is in accordance with what he has learned in over four years in the United States at Princeton University and well beyond that about US ideas and attitudes toward Iran and its nuclear program.

Diplomats get paid as much to listen as to talk. It is the essence of their profession to understand what the other side is saying and how that informs their task of getting a resolution to problems and disputes. Listening is thus essential and in my view ought to consume well over a majority of a diplomat’s time interacting with others at home and abroad. This book is first and foremost a good volume for listening to the writer and understanding his views and most importantly what he has to say about Iran, its attitudes, and how they have been shaped by the interactions, good and bad, with the US and others.

But listening is a complicated affair. In the first instance, it involves understanding what is being said clearly and directly. But even more importantly—and this is where skill and experience comes in—it means trying to understand what is really meant by the words you are hearing or reading. In some instances, that is not always the same thing. Often, those involved in negotiations have settled on what they believe is the best explanation of their views and approach. But behind it, with careful analysis, it is possible to predict what the underlying objectives are and how one might use that understanding to find an approach that can lead to mutual understanding and eventually to agreement.

In part, what Mousavian has written for us raises that challenge clearly and I leave it to the reader to understand the challenge and to

make her or his own judgments. To say that I do not agree with all that is set down is true. But to say also that what is set down is essential for understanding both how Iranians see the issue and therefore for understanding how it might be dealt with is also critical.

There are in looking at this issue several current conundrums which I believe are worth considering as we contemplate, Iran and the United States, how to move ahead together for the future both on the nuclear issue and beyond.

Fundamental to understanding the issue is a difference of view I detect over the interpretation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1966.

On the Iranian side, the view appears to be that the treaty permits and even authorizes any action which does not result in the diversion of nuclear material to a nuclear weapon. That is a view quite broadly shared by a number of states, but often if not exclusively based on the argument that the action being taken—especially in sensitive or dual use technologies (enrichment and reprocessing)—is justified by a civilian or permitted non-weapons purpose. Examples include the production of highly enriched uranium for use in research reactors (now thankfully very largely if not completely abandoned) or for use in naval propulsion reactors. A more dangerous example in my view is the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel to separate the plutonium produced in that fuel. The argument goes that this is not only an excellent way to reduce the total amount of dangerous material in spent fuel from a safety and even non-proliferation point of view, but also allows fuel to be burned in reactors as a mixed oxide fuel and its “fuel value” extracted. The truth is that the environmental argument can be satisfied in a much less dangerous way—long-term underground storage—and that the fuel costs are so expensive in its preparation as to make it non-competitive for the long-term future with low enriched uranium (LEU) for the same purpose. And LEU poses little or no proliferation risk.

On the other side of the ledger is the requirement, happily agreed to in the Joint Plan of Action, that a peaceful civilian program will be jointly reviewed and agreed by Iran and its negotiating parties and become the basis for defining an ongoing Iranian program. Thus, what does not serve or establish a peaceful program does not meet the strictures of the treaty, a view clearly implied in the first approach to this issue (outlined in the preceding paragraph) and which clearly fits the view that if it isn't a part of a peaceful program then it doesn't fit the treaty in intent or specificity. This issue will continue to be a part of the

underlying differences, but to a degree that it can be reconciled, it will help reach an overall rapprochement.

A second issue has to do with the tactical approach of dealing with parts of the negotiations in this context. The US has taken the view that in an outcome which permits some enrichment (and no reprocessing), the best goal is to secure the longest possible time between any possible future decision to “break out” of the civilian program and go for a nuclear weapon. The JPAG arguably achieved a part of that purpose in enlarging the time period from a matter of some 4–6 weeks to some 3–4 months to produce in Iran a significant quantity of highly enriched uranium (for a weapon). The time periods will be disputed, but the rough proportions are right.

Iran takes the view that this is not their negotiating objective and they have not accepted that approach. They have said they believe that a program with limits defined by agreement on the size of a civil program now and for the life of a comprehensive agreement, buttressed by robust inspections and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency of the United Nations (IAEA), which they say in principle, they are ready to accept, is the basis for going ahead.

There should be a path to agreement here if both sides, as I believe they are, are now serious about finding a common approach. What motivates the approach for success is how well we can accord our approach on break out time with the Iranian acceptance of a limited program of enrichment in quantity and quality defined by civil needs and purposes and robustly inspected by the IAEA.

A third issue also lies out on the horizon which ought to be looked at carefully and constructively. Iran, for reasons of pride in its success in its program and perhaps for other reasons, has, in connection with limitations on its enrichment program, taken a strong position that it is not willing to destroy centrifuges and associated equipment in that program. While from my perspective that approach would represent a better and more secure way to proceed, it can also be looked at in perhaps a different but analogous context. Such equipment could be stored, mothballed, or disconnected in ways that would meet the objectives of the negotiations from both sides—a program limited to civil needs on the Iranian side, and with increased time to break out on the US side. Similarly, proposals to convert the underground Fordow site to R and D purposes might also serve the same purpose.

Looking ahead to what would happen should a breakout be seen to be occurring is a problem unlikely to have to be addressed in an agreement. Also, it would seem likely and useful that extended time

would provide an longer time for the use of non-military measures to resolve any such issue should it occur.

While nuclear questions are at the heart of present differences with Iran, they are not the only issues that need to be addressed. Both sides have agreed to keep the nuclear issue at the center of the current negotiations for a comprehensive agreement. But at some point in the future, other questions, as noted in this book, will also have to be considered if the nuclear talks are successful.

Among them are regional questions. These include Afghanistan, where there are shared views. Both sides oppose the Taliban, and see a need to recognize the role of all groups, including the Shia Hazara. They both seek a sovereign, united, and independent Afghanistan at peace with its neighbors and playing a constructive role in the region. Similar views are shared on Iraq, but with potential differences over the degree to which the rights of the Sunni and Kurdish minorities should and have to be accommodated. Syria represents a wider gulf, but even here both agree that Sunni, fundamentalist, terrorist organizations pose a threat to the future of Syria and the region.

Beyond these, there are other questions which must be addressed: regime change; the Mossadegh overthrow; the regional role of Iran; how to deal with the USS *Vincennes*' shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988; the US hostage-taking; funds left over from the Shah's regime in US hands; and how and in what fashion, if things proceed well, the US and Iran might find a path to closer contacts and eventual resumption of full diplomatic relations.

As an American negotiator, it is my experience that quite often negotiating with Washington and its friends and allies consumed more of my time than negotiating with the other parties at the table. This is no doubt part of the US approach to with Iran. While I cannot speak for the Iranian side, this book shows evidence of their having the same problem.

One issue which has now reached prominence is the question of the level of enrichment which Iran might pursue in its future, peaceful, civil program. Much ink has been spilled and many words exchanged over this issue. Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, some of our key Arab friends, and a significant group in the US Congress have all engaged in that discussion and have concluded in favor of "zero enrichment."

Most, if not all, of those who have engaged in this process believe that "zero" would be a preferable course. But a number also believe that given Iran's commitment and expenditure on their program of



enrichment, no combination of leverage and pressure over time will achieve the zero goal. They also make the case that limited enrichment under inspection would be an acceptable approach in terms of getting a good overall agreement.

But it is not really enough to assert that the idea is not acceptable and cannot be negotiated without looking more carefully at some of the key reasons. One of those is that once achieved, mastery of enrichment is not something that can be taken out of the heads and experience of Iranian scientists and technicians. So zero, in terms of hardware and operation, while desirable, is not a complete answer. That means that two things might take place. First, it is unlikely that it will be possible to achieve zero, and one possible requirement in getting there which we cannot accept might be less stringent inspection—IAEA standard safeguard procedures unenhanced by the Additional Protocol which allows for inspections on a broader, more comprehensive basis. That would be a poor bargain. Under those circumstances, Iran might choose or be driven toward a clandestine program—there has been evidence of this in the past. (Indeed as far as we know, all such efforts have been discovered well in advance of their being declared by Iran. And that fact would have to be factored into a risk of discovery by Iran with all the consequences of such an action). Second, it would also be true that without an ongoing monitoring program, such a clandestine approach might be more difficult to detect, because there would be next to no possibility of the transfer of people, information, or equipment from an overt program to a clandestine one without being seen.

It will be important to do all that can be done through inspection and monitoring to deter any such efforts to go “underground” literally and figuratively. Unilateral intelligence, national Technical Means in US–Soviet parlance, can also enhance the uncertainty regarding discovery for any party wishing to try to go the clandestine route.

Further, it may be valuable to look at multilateralizing any enrichment operation in Iran. On the one hand, a number of regional countries might want to consider this both as a potential additional deterrent to a rapid breakout by promoting transparency, and on the other hand, as a source for fuel for research and similar-type reactors. Large investors over time might also find this prospect of interest.

We are presented with a unique gift in Mousavian’s thorough examination of this issue from his perspective. This is a gift of greater

understanding and of a significant opportunity to find a positive result in the negotiations which lie ahead.

Iran–US relations will play a huge role in the future of the Middle East. There will need to be a clear understanding with our friends and allies as we proceed. Many of these remain concerned that the United States, by engaging Iran, is somehow dedicated to turning the careful balance in the region on its head. They too have differences and problems with Iran, some in a theological context, some in a historical context. The truth is that the United States does not wish or is able to change essential balances in the region—and the region these days already presents us with numerous challenges in this regard, following the shifts in Egypt and Syria to mention only a few.

The immediate purpose with Iran is to avoid a nuclear arms threat in the region and the potential for a nuclear arms race that such a development might engender. A solid agreement with Iran, carefully limited and monitored, but respectful on both sides of a civil program, could be a model and not a threat, and indeed represent progress rather than disruption. And it is for the government and people of this region to determine their future relations within the region. Those organizations already functioning among them could well be the basis for their future relations and the United States should, and I feel confident will, support a balanced, equitable, and peaceful future for the Middle East. It is in our national interest to do so. It is clearly the desire of those in the region. Words are important in reaching such arrangements, but even more so, actions are essential. The right actions can help condition the disappearance of misunderstanding and build a barrier to continued mistrust.

The answers on the nuclear question, if they come, will open the door to greater possibilities for agreement on the many issues which still divide us, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Syria, where is more than a modicum of overlap in our national interests. And while that is beyond the scope of the present volume, it is prefigured by its helpful aspects.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to write this foreword.

Ambassador Thomas Pickering



## INTRODUCTION

### *Filling the Gap*

After studying as an undergraduate in the United States, I returned to Iran in 1979 during the upheavals of the revolution. At its victorious conclusion, I joined the new revolutionary government where I remained engaged for three decades in varying official positions working on foreign, security, and domestic policies. This remarkable experience exposed me first-hand to knowledge of the challenges faced by Iran's foreign policy. At the heart of those challenges was conflict between Iran and the West, but more specifically, Iran and the US.

I finally came back to the US in 2009 and began my postdoctoral research career at Princeton University. This new chapter in my life provided opportunities for me to meet hundreds of American and European current and former foreign policy experts and journalists. I worked with the think tanks in the US, the EU, Asia, and the Middle East. Moreover, at Princeton I had the opportunity to engage in Track II diplomacy between Iran and the US, conducting a tremendous amount of work aimed at resolving the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, and ultimately reconciliation between Iran and the US. The conflict has had an important impact on the region and the world's peace and stability. Due to the uncompromising stance between the two states, this struggle could spiral out of control and wind up in a military confrontation, potentially endangering many lives. Additionally, its economic consequences, such as a likely rise of energy costs, could affect millions of lives around the world.

The tenor of Iran–US relations has a tremendous impact on numerous key issues in the Middle East region: the stability of the Persian Gulf, and thus the security of energy; the future of extremism in the region and throughout the world; the fate of the Arab Awakening; the destiny of a Middle East that is free from weapons of mass destruction;

the Israeli–Palestinian peace process; and weak states such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria.

The stability and peace in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is crucial to the entire world, including the West. If the current crisis in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria spiral into total chaos, forfeiting command and control to the unorganized masses, regional and international terrorist organizations are likely to take up residence within their borders. The geography of this region also lends itself to organized crime, serving as a major route for drug trafficking to the West via Turkey and Central Asian countries. Without governance, the region is also primed for the production of drugs. Moreover, chaos, sectarian war, and civil war may spill over into the neighboring countries and destabilize them, thus widening terrorism and organized crime even further.

Numerous books have been written by Western experts, mainly American, looking at the root causes of the conflict between Iran and the US. However, none of them has presented an immediate look at this complex relationship from within Iranian culture, society, and, most importantly, the Iranian policy-making system. This gap has been the cause of misanalysis, followed by the adoption of US establishment policies that have failed to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, these policies have elevated hostilities between the two countries while creating and perpetuating a state of non-compromise between them. This is the gap that this book intends to fill. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once remarked,

I think ... [Iran is] a very opaque place and it's a political system I don't understand very well ... And I'll just say one thing, one of the downsides of not having been in Iran ... is that we don't really have people who know Iran inside our own system ... So that's a problem for us ...<sup>1</sup>

Western views on the Iran–US conflict will be discussed in this book, but the intention is not to offer equal attention to both sides of the conflict. The primary purpose of this book is to shed light on the Iranian side of the story which is hardly covered in the West in order to bring better understanding, thus paving the road to resolving this conflict.

Having served for almost three decades within the Iranian political system, I have pooled my experience and knowledge in search of an answer to the central question of why Iran and the US remain unable to reach a stable compromise. This impasse has existed since the

Iranian revolution, despite numerous opportunities for both countries to resolve the conflict, including several attempts at rapprochement. Yet, the fact that the two states, under the tenure of every president of the United States, have pursued reconciliation suggests that the desire for better relations has always existed. This fact has inspired me to write this book, hoping that better understanding of Iran's politics and society would contribute to the actualization of the two nations' aspirations to restore friendship.

Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst and Iran expert, and Ray Takeyh, a former State Department official and advisor on Iran issues, admit that "it [is] exceptionally difficult for outsiders to perceive Iranian motives and intentions ... the best that outside observers can do is guess at Tehran's motives."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Hamilton Jordan, the Chief of Staff to President Jimmy Carter raises a valid question. Writing about the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran followed by the Iranian hostage crisis, he posited, "we didn't understand that country and its people. How in the world do you negotiate under those circumstances?"<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that for the first time since the Iranian Revolution, Iran and the US have conducted meaningful talks and reached an interim agreement over Iran's nuclear crisis in November 2013. However, caution should be exercised since until the final agreement is reached, there are many hurdles to jump and as a friend and expert said, "The road to a final settlement is long and rocky."

Being engaged over four years with US foreign and domestic policy experts, I now realize that we, Iranians, also misread the American political system. Like Americans, we are also heavily influenced by our perceptions, misperceptions, and biases. Consequently, we place too much importance on statements by American officials, which lend themselves to further intensification of the conflict. Many Iranian decision-makers are not familiar with Western culture. This is a mirror image of the situation in the United States, where many American Congressmen have not visited any foreign country, and even boast that they have no passport.<sup>4</sup> This has sometimes caused major problems in the Iranian understanding of US push-and-pull policies. In fact, the breakthrough in Iran's nuclear dossier in 2013 is due partly to a better understanding in Tehran and Washington, perhaps due to forces on both sides: in the US, the combination of Obama, Kerry, and Hagel and their "engagement policy"; in Iran, the new president, Hassan Rouhani, elected in June 2013, who is a cleric that studied in the seminaries of Qom, as well as a UK PhD graduate, his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, a

US PhD graduate and the head of the Atomic Energy organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, a US PhD graduate.

Nevertheless, the majority of Iranian policy-makers become confused by contradictory statements from the Obama administration on the one hand, and from the US Congress on the other. They do not see that there is infighting and disagreement within the US government on their foreign policy, just as there is in Iran. They view it as a clear manifestation of hypocrisy and duplicity. The Iranian leadership views these contradictions, at best, as signs of a plausible explanation as the US government playing a game of good cop, bad cop.

It is noteworthy that even proponents of realist theory in international relations who view the international system as anarchic, in a state of constant antagonism and struggle for survival, do not rule out minimal cooperation between competing states, as was the case during the Cold War era. Nevertheless, in the case of Iran and the US, there have only been a few piecemeal deals and short-lived periods of cooperation followed by a renewed hostile posture toward each other. In other words, the dominant characteristic of their relationship has been one of non-compromise.<sup>5</sup> Even during the Cold War, the state of relations was not so poor. At that time, the US maintained diplomatic relations with the USSR and its allies in the communist bloc, despite fierce disagreements between them, and ultimately, diplomacy was successful.

### *Points of Contention*

The conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the US is complex. From the American perspective, the major dimensions of conflict include: Iran's provoking anti-Americanism; the potential export of the revolution in one of the most important geostrategic regions of the world (given its huge energy resources, amongst other things); Iran's potential threat to the Arab-Israeli peace process and security of Israel; its nuclear program; its role in terrorism; and its violation of human rights.

The major dimensions of the conflict identified from the Iranian perspective include: the adoption of a humiliating approach toward Iran including the language of threat and intimidation; the US regional hegemony and denial of Iran's role as a regional power; ignoring Iran's interest in the region; and, orchestrating international, multilateral, and unilateral coercive policies against Iran.

*The Conflict as seen from Tehran*

In Iran, there are mainly three schools of thought on the Iran–US conflict. All three share two key grievances: first, that the US does not respect the Islamic identity of Iran; and second, that the US has constantly interfered in Iran’s affairs and wielded any instrument at its disposal to harm the Iranian government. Nevertheless, the three schools depart from each other over whether or not this US perspective may be altered.

The first school, most notably subscribed to by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, maintains that the US is addicted to hegemonic status. This school of thought believes that because Iran’s Islamic establishment rejects foreign domination, the US seeks regime change in an effort to establish a puppet state and exploit Iran’s natural resources.<sup>6</sup>

This school of thought neither categorically rejects dialogue with the US nor having a healthy relationship. It is *pessimistic* about the prospects of the formation of a relationship based on an equal footing, non-interference, common interests, and mutual respect. In March 2013, Ayatollah Khamenei opined that he is “not opposed” to direct talks with the United States—although he remarked that he is “not optimistic,” either.<sup>7</sup>

The second current of thinking, advocated by the radical right and left, asserts that there is inherent antagonism between Iran and the US. The ultra-right focuses on the deep contrast between the Islamic and Western values, while the ultra-left emphasis is on the clash between Iran’s desire for independence and what they call the imperialist nature of the US. The ultra-left was the dominant current in the first decade after the revolution, and the ultra-right emerged after the end of Iran–Iraq War. While the ultra-left has almost disappeared, the ultra-right (i.e. “hardliners” in this book) has remained a relevant political force, although they are not big in terms of the number of followers.

The ultra-right argues not only that reconciliation is impossible between Iran and the US, but, more importantly, that reconciliation would conflict with Islamic values. In their view, negotiation with the United States must be considered as the red line. Even the United States’ repeated demands for Iran to “change its behavior” are interpreted as a prelude for stripping Iran of its Islamic identity and, more importantly, de-escalating Iran’s position as the spearhead of the war against “global arrogance” led by the United States. Hossein Shariatmadari, the chief



editor of the daily newspaper *Kayhan* and a staunch proponent of this school of thought, views any talks with the US as “a huge strategic mistake.”<sup>8</sup> “Talking to America,” he states, “is [tantamount to] shaking hands with the devil and dancing with the wolves.”<sup>9</sup>

The third school of thought, represented by Iran’s former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, agrees with the notion that the American system, if it can, will harm Iran’s Islamic establishment. However, they remain optimistic about altering the US perspective, as well as the possibility of achieving normalization in relations while protecting Iran’s national interests. This school of thought is prepared for serious and comprehensive efforts for maximum engagement with the United States based on mutual respect, non-interference, and advancing mutual interests as the best way to serve the national interest of Iran. The group, described as “centrist,” “moderate,” and “pragmatist,” supports a free market economy and favors privatization of state-owned industries. Proponents of this third school of thought intend to invest in common interests between Iran and the US.

They assert that a negotiation-based resolution can be a win-win situation that offers huge rewards for both countries. They also assert that negotiations between Iran and the US can minimize or eliminate serious threats to both countries which originate from each other’s policies, as well as from external forces such as Salafi extremists.

Since the conclusion of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, the first and third schools of thought have vacillated between cooperation and rejection, while the second has relentlessly sought to prevent the formation of relations between Iran and the US.

### *Elements Obstructing the Formation of Meaningful Dialogue and Easing Tensions*

#### *Mistrust: Widely discussed, but ignored in practice*

Material factors such as competition over power and interests play a major role in the conflict. However, a sense of profound mistrust is largely responsible for the longevity of deadlock, as well as perpetuation of the hostile, often uncompromising relationship between the two states. The mistrust has now gained an independent life in the relationship between Iran and the US, almost detached from competition over power and interests.

Mistrust has been one of the major reasons Iranians shy away from engaging in lasting dialogue and negotiations with the US. They fear deception and humiliation by what they perceive as a powerful propaganda machine, without any opportunity to defend itself or confront such propaganda on an equal footing. Ostensibly, in the absence of enduring dialogue, it is illogical to expect a negotiated solution. Most destructively, mistrust has obstructed the formation of meaningful and sustainable talks.

Iranians initially lost trust in the US after its admitted role in the 1953 coup d'état which overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran's popular, democratically-elected prime minister. For the following 25 years, the US supported the Shah and supported Iraq's invasion of Iran (1980–8).

The US mistrust of Iran began in 1979 with the seizure of their embassy in Tehran by radical students followed by 52 Americans being held hostage for 444 days. The mutual mistrust has reached the level of dogma. This has elevated the entangled narrative to such a degree that each government has tried to justify destructive policies toward the other in efforts to cripple capabilities and inflict harm.

This mutual mistrust stems from the US treatment of and policies toward Iran, and from Iran's behavior and its reactions to those policies. Surprisingly, many American experts and policy-makers admit that mistrust largely affects Iran–US relations, yet the policies that they propose or adopt only serve to intensify the mistrust between the two states.

### *Regime change policy*

The “regime change” policy of the US, as perceived by all of the Iranian politicians and policy-makers across the political spectrum, is the primary factor that continually fuels the high level of mistrust toward the US, and rejection of any compromise. There is a cornucopia of offenses to choose from: paralyzing economic sanctions; allocating budgets under the banner of supporting freedom in Iran;<sup>10</sup> covert operations to create chaos in Iran;<sup>11</sup> CIA activities inside the country;<sup>12</sup> including Iran in the “axis of evil”; clear rejection of security guarantees to Iran,<sup>13</sup> and more. Iranians view all of these as clear signs pointing to regime change. President Obama's statement that he would “never take military action off the table,”<sup>14</sup> coupled with the toughest sanctions in the last three decades imposed during his presidency, have convinced Iranians that, despite the change in leadership, the same regime-change

doctrine is in motion. Major changes, both in Iran's and the US's foreign policy during the latter part of 2013 had engendered hope that there might be "a crack in the wall of mistrust."<sup>15</sup>

### *Misperceptions and misanalysis*

Misperceptions of the two countries' policy-makers have undoubtedly contributed to the failure of policies and initiatives aimed at détente between them, resolving the two countries' conflict over Iran's nuclear issue, and most importantly, establishing a meaningful dialogue between the two governments.

James L. Richardson, an international relations expert, offered a definition for misperception as "faulty, inaccurate or incorrect perception of a situation: it is perceived to have characteristics which are not present, or which are present to a significantly lesser or greater extent than perceived."<sup>16</sup> This definition is useful because, as will be discussed in this book, numerous positions and policies adopted by the two states that are largely responsible for the perpetuation of the conflict are based on miscalculations, and misanalysis of the situation.

Outstanding among misperceptions of American policy-makers as well as misanalysis by the analysts is the use of "coercive diplomacy" to change the behavior of the Iranian government. To fulfill this objective, the US "is committed to a dual-track policy of applying pressure in pursuit of constructive engagement, and a negotiated solution."<sup>17</sup> Sanctions are central to this dual-track diplomacy. The language of intimidation and threat of military action under the mantra of "all options are on the table" is also part of US coercive diplomacy. Isolation, both regionally and internationally, is another element of US's coercive policy toward Iran. This book broadly assesses these "coercive policies" and why they have failed and will continue to fail. These policies are based on the flawed premise that Iran will surrender to pressure. American policy-makers entirely ignore the pervasive role of "pride" in Iran's politics. Hassan Rouhani, during his swearing-in ceremonies, repeated this major but constantly ignored demand by Iranians: "I say this straightforwardly. If you seek a suitable answer, speak to Iran through the language of respect, not through the language of sanctions."<sup>18</sup>

For better or worse, Iranians are a proud nation. This characteristic has roots in Iran's long history of civilization. Pride and national pride are ubiquitous in Iranian culture and discourse. The notion of pride is

linked to empowerment rather than submission. That is the reason Iran fiercely resists coercive policies, particularly the sanctions.

John Limbert, former Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of Iranian affairs at the State Department during 2009–10, explains the weakness in this US approach as follows: “Since 1979 ... [w]e’ve used sanctions against Iran. They’re something we know. They’re something with which we have experience ... [But] changing the unproductive relationship that we’ve had with Iran for the last 30 years [is something] that we do not know how to do. That’s hard.”<sup>19</sup>

The risk of misperceiving that coercion will eventually work is that at some point, Iran’s patience may wane to the point of abandoning its rationality, and responding to those US pressures in a hostile manner. This would most likely lead to a destructive war.

Some may argue that sanctions encouraged Iran to return to the negotiation table in late 2013. This assertion is wrong. The realization of an interim agreement in November 2013 was the will of Iran’s new moderate administration seeking rapprochement with the West, in particular the US, its neighbors, and the rest of the world. In addition, it reflected the change of the US position toward Iran’s nuclear program from “no enrichment of uranium” to “no nuclear bomb.” Iran has not left the negotiating table since talks began in 2003, even during the tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While I was a member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005, Iran had not been faced by crippling sanctions, yet in March 2005, Iran suggested measures similar to those stipulated in the November 2013 interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1, to ensure that the country would not divert its nuclear program toward weaponization. The 2005 talks failed because, as I was told by the European negotiators, the US position was “zero enrichment” in Iran. This claim is verifiable. If the US goes back to similar approach of “no enrichment in Iran”, it would be unlikely to reach a settlement on the nuclear issue, despite the imposition of paralyzing sanctions.

### *Domestic political struggles*

Domestic political struggles in Tehran and Washington have repeatedly undercut efforts for engagement. One of the main problems with Iran–US rapprochement is the lack of consensus for a genuine engagement in both capitals. Since the 1979 Revolution, neither the US nor Iranian administrations have released any realistic study on the balance of costs and benefits of rapprochement.<sup>20</sup> Instead, both capitals’ political systems have been locked in a Cold War model. It has been constant

pull and push on both sides. In other words, there has been no real, strategic foreign policy. It has dominantly been domestic politics that seems to determine foreign policies toward one another.

### *Spoilers*

Last but not least, spoilers have played a major role in blocking diplomatic efforts, not only for rapprochement, but even for cooperation on issues of common interest. Hardliners, in Iran, the United States, and Israel, as well as some Arab countries in the region and the terrorist group Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK<sup>21</sup>), have constantly sabotaged the relations between the two states. We observe a pattern of intensification of efforts to neutralize attempts at reconciliation between Iran and the US right at the very moments when hopes for an improvement in relations appear on the horizon. The harsh reactions of the Israeli government, including warnings of military action, and the pro-Israel lobbying group, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), urging the Congress to pass a new sanctions bill after the interim Geneva agreement to Iran's nuclear program was signed between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in November 2013, are clear examples of such efforts.

### *Structure of this Book*

*Iran and The United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* is structured chronologically. It analyzes the key events and personnel that have shaped the hostile Iran-US relationship as well as describing the conflict between the states as viewed from Tehran. The book demonstrates the influence of psychological and cultural factors on the Iranian mindset. These factors have remained opaque to the analysts and policy-makers of the US who advocate reconciliatory solutions, but as is customary, focus merely on economic and political tradeoffs. Based on its findings, the book offers a realistic and feasible road map to peace to address not only substantive but also cultural-psychological factors.

The first chapter is a condensed review of three very different periods in the shared history of these two states. Without any knowledge of the actual history of relations between the two nations, one could believe that the United States and Iran have, from the outset, been locked in disputes.

The second chapter reveals how profound mistrust and misperceptions on both sides shaped the hostage crisis, with effects that few could have imagined would be so long lasting. The significance of the hostage crisis lies in the fact that it marks the big bang, the beginning of time in the hostile relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Identifying the root causes of the hostage crisis leads us to understand the underlying causes of both the formation and perpetuation of the conflict between Iran and the US. This is because many of today's points of contention between Iran and the US either did not exist or were insignificant at that time. There was no competition over hegemony in the region between the two countries, cultural differences had not emerged, the issue of Israel was a non-factor, and there was no dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Chapter 3's focus is on Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1989, although it also addresses other events such as the bombing of the Islamic Republic Party's headquarters and attempts on my life.

US aid to Saddam, which is detailed in this chapter, and the US's absolute silence after Iraq's criminal use of chemical weapons against the Iranians solidified hatred toward the US in the Iranian power elite. The leadership embraced the belief that the US, no matter the cost, was determined to change the Iranian *nezam* (political establishment).

The strategic thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, was that the war would end only when the "heretic" Saddam was overthrown. Ayatollah Khomeini viewed Saddam as a permanent threat to the whole region that had to be rooted out. To achieve this, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) prepared a plan. However, some high-ranking figures, despite the objection of many politicians, finally convinced the leader of the Iranian Revolution to accept a ceasefire and end the war. While Tehran defeated Saddam's plan to disembody Iran and bring about a regime change, it failed to remove the aggressor. What Ayatollah Khomeini considered as "drinking [a] chalice of poison" and the developments up to the acceptance of the ceasefire are explicated in this chapter.

Chapter 4 discusses the eight-year presidency of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani, a pragmatic centrist and moderate conservative, took office in 1989. He sought economic development through the free market model, active and productive relations with the West, and the reestablishment of relations with the US. Rafsanjani sought to use Germany as a doorway to implementing full diplomatic and economic relations with Europe and détente and normalization

with the US. My mission as Iran's ambassador to Germany was to help actualize these objectives.

However, due to the lack of reciprocation by the West toward the Iranians' overtures, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, supported a less flexible stance. Thus emerged the thesis of "the West minus the United States." This heralded the emergence of two distinctive schools of thought in the *nezam* which have endured for the last 25 years.

From high hopes to total disappointment, the chapter tells how Rafsanjani's plans and my efforts for positive interactions with the West ended in failure. We see how terror events, broken promises, and policies based on misperceptions and misanalyses all contributed to Rafsanjani's failure in his efforts at closing the gap between Iran and the United States.

The eight-year presidency of the reformist Mohammad Khatami is explained and analyzed in Chapter 5. By highlighting some unprecedented attempts at rapprochement proposed from both sides and extraordinary cases of cooperation between the two governments, the chapter reveals how perceptions, misperceptions and misanalysis ultimately blocked the success of those efforts.

Through spotlighting some major developments of this period, the dynamics of Iran's foreign policy decision-making are decoded. Contrary to the Western vision, the Supreme Leader's will is not the only force that determines the tenor and direction of foreign policy. He constantly monitors the two opposing camps and then decides. In this chapter, based on my knowledge of Ayatollah Khamenei's mindset, I answer the key question: "Why does Ayatollah Khamenei oppose renewing the relationship with the United States?"

The revelation of Iran's nuclear program escalated the Iran-US conflict to new heights. As the former spokesman of Iran's negotiating team, I provide an insight into the developments, debates, and visions within and outside the government of Iran. I demonstrate the hidden but significant role of the US in the failure of the negotiations between the moderate administration of Khatami and the Europeans.

A factional struggle between moderates and radicals dating back to the late 1980s led to the emergence of Ahmadinejad followed by the radicalization of the government after 16 years of the moderates' rule. In Chapter 6, the causes of this transformation are reviewed. However, the aggressive policies of the George W. Bush administration were arguably the decisive factor in the rise of radicalism in Iran.

The straw that broke the camel's back, was the failure of the West

to accept Khatami's moderate team's attempt to secure Iran's nuclear program. This, as I was informed by the Europeans, was directly linked to the US behind-the-scene activities.

Chapter 6 also discusses the conflict at the intersection of Ahmadinejad and the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Obama's election gave hope for change in US offensive policies toward Iran. The chapter illustrates why Obama's rapprochement failed. In the aftermath of Iran's 2009 disputed presidential election, due to the lack of knowledge about Iran's politics and misanalysis of the situation in Iran, thus overestimating the power and misreading the nature of the so-called Green Movement, by both American policy-makers and analysts alike, the Obama administration suddenly adopted extremely coercive policies intended to either change the behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran or to bring about regime change.

A host of other issues, such as the cost of ignorance as well as miscalculations on the part of the Iranians, and the reasons why Iran's position was strengthened in Iraq during Ahmadinejad's presidency, are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 7 explores the major issues of the conflict between Iran and the US including terrorism, Iran–Israel conflict and the human rights. While the West has accused Iran of state-sponsored terrorism, that country has also been victim of terrorism and served as a key partner to the US in combating terrorism in the Middle East, especially following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Based on analysis, I prescribe a way forward for the two states in combating their common enemies.

Iran's hostile stance toward Israel does not limit to Rafsanjani period. Iran's hostile stance toward Israel became a major factor in Iran–US relations. The chapter discusses the views of Tehran and explains the root causes of Iran's hostility toward Israel. Finally, the chapter discusses the dispute over human rights, details the views of the two states in this respect and offers solution to this complex dimension of the conflict.

Chapter 8 is a road map to peace. The current precarious state of affairs cannot be sustained. If no common ground is created between Iran and the US, one of two scenarios, both with similar outcomes, is likely to occur. As pressures build over time, patience for long diplomatic processes will diminish and, most likely, military confrontation will take the place of diplomacy. Or, as the US tightens sanctions and, ultimately, the *nezam's* survival is threatened, once they feel that they have nothing more to lose, Iran's retaliatory actions such as destabilizing American allies in the Persian Gulf, destabilizing US interests



in the region, and disrupting the passage of oil through the Strait of Hormuz may lead to an inadvertent or deliberate war.

The rewards for normalization of relations would be substantial for both countries. In cooperation, the two sides could address the concerns of the United States' Arab allies, stabilize Iraq, Syria, and even Afghanistan, secure a sustainable and stable flow of oil, create more security for Israel, fight Salafi-Al-Qaeda terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and put an end to Iran's economic difficulties.

Although there are more issues involved than nuclear development, a peaceful resolution to that *one* issue should be considered as a key starting point for peace between the two states. However, "[p]eace on the nuclear issue alone while other cases of conflict remain unresolved would be unstable."<sup>22</sup>

As a proponent of the "maximum engagement" school of thought between Iran and the West/US, based on 35 years of experiences in diplomacy, in order to address mistrust and promote better and enduring friendly relations between Iran and the West/US, my aim is to formulate a workable, realistic, win-win road map to resolve the protracted standoff in Iran-US relations. I wish to substitute friendship and peace for hatred and hostilities between the two great countries of Iran and America. This aim is pursued in *Iran and The United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*.

## Chapter 1

### IRAN-US RELATIONS: FROM FRIENDS TO FOES

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, relations between Iran and United States have been typified by heightened animosity and mistrust, at times teetering on the brink of confrontation. However, this has not always been the case. Prior to this period, from the origins of formal Iran-US relations dating back to the mid-1800s, two other vastly different periods define the interaction between the two nations.

During the first period (1856–1953), Iran viewed the United States as a benevolent international power whose intent was to support the independence and sovereignty of a weaker nation threatened by imperial powers. However, following the Second World War and the ensuing rise of the United States as a superpower—as well as its increasing tensions with the Soviet Union—its interest in preserving the independence of Iran quickly dissipated. The newfound international position of the US shifted its foreign policy objectives, particularly in the resource-rich region of the Middle East, focusing more on energy security and encumbering the spread of Soviet influence.

The 1953 coup that toppled Iran's first democratically elected government marked the beginning of the second period of relations (1953–79). The US supported the ousting of Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. Ironically, it was US assistance in building institutions to strengthen reform and representative rule in Iran that had planted the seed of democracy. By installing Mohammad Reza Shah in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, Iran-US relations entered a new chapter characterized by a patron-client relationship and intrusive involvement by the US in Iran's domestic affairs.

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran entered the third period, which will be comprehensively discussed in this book.

*Cordial Relations: 1856–1953*

The beginnings of Iran–US relations dates back to 1856, when the two nations signed a Treaty of Commerce and Friendship based on mutual understanding and friendship.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Americans were viewed favorably by Iranians, who had come to praise the United States for the growing charitable work of American missionaries in the country.<sup>2</sup> Initial American involvement was well received in Iran because it was in the midst of staving off British and Russian pressure on its territorial integrity. Iran sought to establish relations with Washington to offset their influence.<sup>3</sup> The United States was widely regarded as a charitable international power whose foreign policy doctrine was based on protecting the weak from imperialist powers.<sup>4</sup> What began as an economic treaty between the two nations in 1856 led to formal diplomatic relations, with the opening of the US diplomatic mission in Tehran in 1883 and the first Iranian representative arriving in Washington in 1888.<sup>5</sup>

Relations between the two countries remained cordial; there was no interference by the United States in the internal affairs of Iran, giving them no reason for distrust. The US retained its spectator role and refrained from intervening during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11. The uprising took place in response to the failure of the Qajar<sup>6</sup> monarchy to improve the socio-economic and political condition of the people. This popular movement brought together all parts of Iranian society—the clerics, merchants, intellectuals, nationalists, and socialists—in an effort to curb the powers of the monarch. The national effort culminated in the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Iran.<sup>7</sup>

*American heroes of Iran*

While the US government avoided a public stance on the matter and refused to get involved in the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, nonetheless, from the ashes of the struggle to achieve independence, an American hero emerged for the Iranians: Howard Baskerville. In the early 1900s, Howard Baskerville emigrated to Iran as a Presbyterian missionary, teaching at the American Memorial School in Tabriz at the time second largest city of Iran, and, during the Constitutional Revolution, actively supporting the constitutionalists who were fighting against the royalists. He gave his life in the ensuing battle.

Baskerville's ultimate sacrifice for Iranian independence and the democratic movement in Iran not only made him a hero, but also

bolstered Iran's conviction that the United States supported the rights of the people and their thirst for freedom. Baskerville's example also gave rise to the idea that Americans viewed the "other" on an equal footing. His statement that "[t]he only difference between me and these people is my place of birth, and this is not a big difference"<sup>8</sup> was the manifestation of that egalitarian view.

In response to the revolution, the British and Russians put their differences aside to ensure that their mutual interests in Iran were not jeopardized. Their efforts resulted in the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907, in which northern Iran would come under Russian influence while the south would be controlled by Britain.<sup>9</sup> This foreign imposition made the reform and strengthening of institutions a critical necessity for the new government.

To spearhead the reform initiative, the Constitutionalists looked for a foreign partner that would actively and willingly assist in building an independent nation without ulterior motive. The natural choice was the United States, as it was the only major power that could be entrusted with such a task, particularly since the memory of Baskerville was fresh in the minds of the Constitutionalists and the US had established that its intentions in Iran were not to encroach on Iran's sovereignty.

This belief on the part of the Constitutionalists led to the Iranians requesting Washington to recommend a financial advisor who would assist Iran's restructuring of its financial sector. Such an advisor would be given the authority and scope necessary to perform the task. Washington accepted the request and by their recommendation, the Iranians recruited a lawyer with experience in financial matters, William Morgan Shuster. Shuster was not an employee of the American government but came as a private citizen, further deepening the perception that the United States had no wish or policy intention to meddle in Iran's domestic affairs, yet would extend its help to the country.<sup>10</sup>

Shuster arrived with a small team of financial advisors in 1911 and was shortly thereafter elected by the Iranian parliament as the Treasurer General of Persia. Shuster's devotion, dedication, and honesty in assisting Iran to the best of his ability engendered great respect from the Iranians, and contributed to the growing admiration for the ethical manner in which the United States operated. However, the Russians and British grew impatient with his outspoken opposition to their intrusion in Iran's domestic affairs. In Shuster's invaluable book, *The Strangling of Persia*, which detailed the events that led to the collapse of the Constitutional Revolution and described the encroachment of

British and Russian in Iran, he stated, "It was obvious that the people of Persia deserve much better than what they are getting, that they wanted us to succeed, but it was the British and the Russians who were determined not to let us succeed."<sup>11</sup>

The independent stance Shuster adopted toward the imperial powers resulted in a Russian ultimatum to Iran to oust Shuster or face the consequences. The Iranians resisted the ultimatum. The Russians retaliated by invading northern Iran and marching onward toward the capital, Tehran. Only then was the decision reluctantly made to expel Shuster. The parliament was consequently suspended.

While Iran paid a high price, Shuster's stance and commitment to improving the Iranian economy and standing up for values such as equality, dignity, and freedom reinforced the positive perception the Iranian people had of the United States. Shuster later wrote, "The Persian people, fighting for a chance to live and govern themselves instead of remaining the serfs of wholly heartless and corrupt rulers, deserved better of fate than to be forced, as now, either to sink back into an even worse serfdom or to be hunted down and murdered as 'revolutionary dregs.' British and Russian statesmen may be proud of their work in Persia; it is doubtful whether anyone else is."<sup>12</sup>

There were other Americans who contributed immensely to the development of Iran. In the education sector, Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan was seen as the pioneer who laid the foundation for the modern education establishment in Iran. Jordan devoted his life to improving the educational system in Iran by serving as the principal of the American High School in Tehran from 1898 to 1941. In the medical field, Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran was the founder of Iran's first modern College of Medicine in 1879.

These examples and various others cemented the notion that the United States was interested in fostering better relations, advancing the Iranians' cause of independence, protecting the weak, and promoting democratic ideals. Yet it must be noted that US foreign policy toward Iran was also driven by a reluctance to challenge the vital interests of Britain and Russia, as evidenced in the dismissal of Shuster.

### *Saving Iran from British rule*

At the onset of the First World War in 1914, Iran declared its neutrality and made numerous efforts to avoid the war. However, Iran's declared neutrality failed to protect it from the invasion of its territory by the belligerent powers of Russia and Britain. Owing to its strategic location,