

IRAN-UNITED STATES STRATEGIC RELATIONS

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Abstract

Relations between Islamic Republic of Iran and United States in the recent past have been the most contentious one in the changing world. The relationship between the two countries has moved from close allies to estrangement. The tragic event of 11 September 2001 and the US military campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan relieved Iran of the Taliban threat created the opportunity for the new beginning but did not improve due to lack of U.S. proper strategy. Future improvements in the relations would require first to remove the existing irritants and misunderstanding between the two countries. The paper seeks to analyse the strategic relations between Iran and United States in the light of the recent developments. It also tries to answer for the following questions. What are the main area of irritants between Iran and U.S.? Does the estranged relationship between India and United States pose any threat to the regional security of Persian Gulf?

Keywords: Axis of Evil, Security, Dual Containment, Hezbollah, Israel, Nuclear Proliferation.

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Introduction

U.S-Iran relations have been marred by mutual distrust, misunderstanding and a series of other events. Since the events of 1979, neither U.S. nor Iran has made serious, concerted efforts to reconcile the differences that preclude a return to a more normalized political relationship. The lack of formal diplomatic relations does not mean that there has been no dialogue or contact between successive U.S. administrations and their counterparts in Tehran, or between segments of American and Iranian civil society, however. Rather, the U.S. and Iran have engaged in an array of unofficial, back channel, and third-party diplomacy during this time.¹

Relations between Islamic Republic of Iran and United States in the recent past have been the most contentious one in the changing world. The relationship between the two countries has moved from close allies to estrangement. This is reflected from the fact that in his State of the Union Address in 2002, President Bush labeled Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil,' outraging the Iranian leadership. Iran responded with a public statement: "the Islamic Republic is proud to be a target of the hate and anger of the world's greatest evil; we never seek to be praised by American officials."² The main areas of irritants between Iran and United States are American ambition to dictate terms and condition in Persian Gulf, Iran nuclear ambition, Iran support to terrorists groups, American policy towards Israel-Palestine problem, etc.

The tragic event of 11 September 2001 and the US military campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan relieved Iran of the Taliban threat created the opportunity for the new beginning but did not improve due to lack of U.S. proper strategy. U.S. was not able to capitalize on the opportunity that come their way after 9/11 events, instead they continue to follow aggressive approach towards Iran. This has only widened the misunderstanding between the two countries. U.S. forces and the Northern Alliance that benefited from Iranian military support, eventually toppled the Taliban. Iran supported the state-building process defined by the United Nations Bonn Conference. Iran pledged \$580 million for Afghan reconstruction.³

Geo-Strategic Significance of Iran

Iran stands out prominently as the largest and most populous Islamic nation in the oil-rich region of the Western Asia. The country possesses major attributes of a regional power in the Western

Asia by virtue of its geo-strategic location, geographical land mass and human resources. It has sizeable revenues from oil and gas exports. Despite the fact that Iran has only 1% of the world's population (70 million), the country owns 7% of the world's natural reserves including 11% of proven global oil reserves and 16% of the world's natural gas resources which translates into 133 billion barrels of oil (17 billion tons) and 27 trillion cubic meters of gas, totaling to \$4000 billions by current price of oil and gas.⁴

Iran's geo-strategic location draws significant attention from all major powers. It has an appreciably long coastline on the North Arabian Sea and it dominates the entire eastern flank of Persian Gulf. It has long borders with Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It also borders on the residual republics of the former Soviet Union. In the North, Iran also has a coastline on the Caspian Sea and it shares borders with the Republics in the Central Asian region. Iran could rightly be termed as the "enter port" for the Central Asian Republics. Significantly, Iran as the potential regional power of the Western Asia is an Islamic Shi'a state in marked contrast to most of its neighbors who are Sunnis.

Iran's geo-strategic location and its potential as a regional power led to the United States building it into one of the "strategic pillars" of American grand strategy in West Asia. This was during the Shah of Iran's regime in the 1970s. However, the ouster of the Shah in 1979 and the military failure of the United States in the Iranian hostage crisis ensued led to Iran figuring significantly as a "strategic threat" to U.S. security interests in the Western Asia. From then onwards Iran has been *persona non grata* with the United States.⁵

Iran-U.S. Relations after Cold War

The disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the end of cold war brought significant changes in the relationship among the states of the world. But Iran-U.S. relations did not show any way of improving. Since the relationship between the two countries was based on the misunderstanding that developed after the fall of Shah Regime in Iran.

Soon after the end of cold war, Clinton administration announced its policy the "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq. This policy was the outcome of an assessment that the current Iraqi and Iranian regimes were hostile to American interest in the region. With this policy, the USA on

the one hand was aiming at enhancing its military commitment to the Gulf with closer military ties to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey while on the other hand; it issued an executive order banning all US trade and investment activities in Iran. However, US oil companies through their foreign affiliates became Iran's largest purchaser of oil despite Executive Order.

With the advent of Khatami Administration, there was some hope for improvement in the relationship between the two countries. The Clinton administration changed its policy towards Iran. This change in policy was first revealed by the speech of Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright in Asia Society in 1998. A further instance of the goodwill of the Clinton administration towards Iran was to place an opposition group to the Iranian regime, the Mojahedeen e-Khalq, on the terrorist list, to freeze its financial assets in the USA and to deny US visas to its members. The move by Khatami Administration to remove the former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, an architect of terror campaigns was highly appreciated by the Clinton Administration. Also there emerged some understanding on the threats posed by Saddam Hossein to the regional security of the Persian Gulf.

Relationship by the Turn of Twenty-first Century

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Bush replaced Clinton as the new President of U.S. When he became the President of U.S., he came with a well set out objective of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. On the very first year in office, the U.S. homeland came under severe attack by the terrorist group based in Afghanistan. With this, defeating terrorism emerged on top of his agenda. The events of 9/11 no doubt open the opportunity for improving the relations between Iran and United States, but could not capitalize on it. As Iran was also seriously concerned about the terrorist threat emerging from Afghanistan. Immediately after 11 September, nearly all Iranian officials condemned the attacks, saying that terrorism was wrong regardless of where it took place.⁶

During the operation in Afghanistan and in response to American request, Iran had agreed to assist American pilots downed on Iranian soil and to allow transshipment of food and humanitarian supplies for Afghan refugees in northwestern Afghanistan. During his visit to New York for the opening of the UN General Assembly in October, Khatami condemned Osama bin Laden and his supporters as extremists and terrorists, a “cult of fanatics who...could only

communicate with perceived opponents through carnage and destruction.” He said that there were no barriers to cultural or economic ties with the United States.⁷

In an interview with Iranian TV only a day after the attacks, former deputy Foreign Minister and Deputy Chairman of the Majlis Foreign Relations Committee, Mohammad Javad Larijani, argued Bin-Ladin was only a “bogey man” created by the US and the West and that the attacks were almost certainly masterminded by “the Zionists” to prepare the ground for exerting pressure on Islamic countries, increasing US presence in the region and confronting states that pursued independent foreign policies. He also argued that the US had to come to terms with the consequences of its own policy, arguing: “The Americans are desperate, and in desperation, signs of barbarism manifest themselves.” Instead, the September 11th terrorist attacks on the US in 2001 escalated the tension between the two countries.⁸ Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i sharply criticized President Bush for saying that “whoever is not with us is against us”. He declared that Bush’s comments were an indication of the “arrogance of power.”⁹ President Bush accused Iran of being part of an “axis of evil” together with North Korea and Iraq. He further accused Iran of interfering in Afghanistan internal affairs and of developing weapons of mass destruction.¹⁰

Karin-A incident was the first such major issues between Iran and U.S. in which the latter has accused Iran of secretly shipping arms to Palestinians militants. The most prominent US accusations against Iran are focused on four areas of sponsoring terrorism, secretly trying to build nuclear weapons, the probability that Iran is attempting to stop Middle East peace process, as well as violation of human rights that all led to the extension of the past sanctions. The re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 US presidential election - while Iran was resistant to American pressures- made American and Israel military attack to Iran a more serious scenario. But that was not the case due to the emergence of some other challenges such as intensified insecurity in Iraq, and consequently, the new waves of internal and external critics against Bush administration policies.¹¹

United States under the Bush Administration maintains economic sanctions against Iran in response to Iran's support for international terrorism, its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and more recently it has claimed Iran for practicing of supplying arms to insurgents operating in Iraq.¹²

U.S. Administration national security strategy document released on March 16, 2006, states that “may face no greater challenge from a single country than Iran.” For which, the Bush Administration has pursued several avenues to attempt to contain the potential threat posed by Iran, including supporting a long-term policy of changing Iran’s regime. However, the near-term Administration drive to prevent any Iranian nuclear weapons breakthrough has brought diplomatic and economic strategies to the forefront of U.S. policy. As part of that effort, the Bush Administration announced on May 31 that it would negotiate with Iran in concert with U.S. allies.¹³

The Iranian officials have accused U.S. for following a strategy of encircling Iran. He declared that no-one feared the US any longer. Iran is not satisfied with the growing U.S. presence in Iraq. Tehran perceived it as a move to contain Iran. In response to this American move, former President of Iran, Rafsanjani also said that Iran preferred Saddam Hussain to the US. His comments were given prominence by Iran’s official news agency, IRNA. Rafsanjani declared: “We never want the US to become victorious over Iraq, because the US is more dangerous to us than Iraq, as is a viper to a scorpion and a pit to a hole.”¹⁴

Impediments to Iran-U.S. Relations

This section would discuss the main area of impediments to Iran-U.S. relations.

“Hezbollah” and Israeli Issue

From the standpoint of regulating Iranian-American relations, the issue of the Lebanese organization “Hezbollah” will also remain unsettled. Two years ago “Hezbollah”- Israel war showed how effective was military and financial assistance of Iran to this organization.

Today “Hezbollah” is one of the main levers of influencing Iran in the zone of Arabic-Israeli conflict, which may be used by Teheran with all its might in case of military clash with the US or Israel. It is obvious that “Hezbollah” first of all poses direct threat to Israel, and not the US. However, it is quite doubtful that after Obama’s victory the relations between the US and Israel will become cooler, all the more they will stop military cooperation. B. Obama’s visit to Jerusalem and his speech at the World Jewish Congress in June of the current year where he in

particular said that Jerusalem was not liable to division and belonged to Israel, have come to prove about further preservation of the US-Israel ally.

In that case the US just couldn't undertake qualitative settlement, and especially improving its relations with Iran not taking into account Israel's interests. This supposes liquidation of "Hezbollah," which is unacceptable for Iran: such requirements mean liquidation of one of the sub-units of its own army.

One shouldn't expect such improvements between the US-Iran relations which may make a conviction in Teheran that the US and Israel will not undertake anti-Iranian steps. Accordingly, Iran's assistance to "Hezbollah" will continue. In that way the problems of "Hezbollah" and Israel also seem to be unsettled in relations between Iran and the US.

The Nuclear Issue

After September 11, some Iranian leaders, most notably Hashemi-Rafsanjani who was an advocate of selective bandwagoning, indicated that possession of nuclear weapons would substantially enhance the status and bargaining power of Muslim countries. According to Rafsanjani: "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." While Other Iranian leaders claimed that they only sought peaceful nuclear technology, contending that the country's oil resources were finite and that Iran needed nuclear power to be a serious country.¹⁵

Slowly but step by step Iran moves toward establishing its own nuclear military potential. It goes without saying that first of all the United States pushes the Islamic Republic to create its own nuclear power. The army of NATO's member country Turkey is better armed and more battle-worthy, Pakistan and Russia are military powers. The relations with the nuclear Pakistan remain quite problematic for Iran: political developments in that country may one day bring to the power of Isalist radicals with hostile disposition to Iran and Shi'ism. According to some experts, it is the very problem of Pakistan (from military and long-term standpoint) that makes the Iranian party to unfold the military program.

Under such circumstances, even if certain changes are reported in the US-Iran relations, they can not make Iran stop the nuclear program. At the same time, it is hardly possible to expect changes in the US position to Iran's nuclear program. Washington can not let Iran turn into a nuclear power. It will stimulate rise of Teheran's political influence in the region and will result weakening of American position. In that way the issue of Iran-US relations will remain conflicting, and its settlement by means of negotiations is hardly possible.

It is not excluded that the US will also stimulate Iran's energy "entry" into Europe as a counterbalance to Russia and the EU position, which is partially conditioned by the fact that Russia is the main exporter of natural gas to Europe. After the Georgian-Russian conflict Russia's increasing influence seems to be becoming a problem of priority character for Washington, which may also solve the problem by using Iran's pretension to become the biggest state-exporter of natural gas to the European Union.¹⁶

Terrorism

Once the relations between Iran and United States start deteriorating, U.S. starts claiming for Iranian support for terrorism. Such a false claim and accusation started since the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979. According to the claims by the U.S. Department of State, Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism. The bulk of accusations of Iran's support for terrorists is focused on Tehran's backing of Hezbollah and the Palestinian freedom fighter groups of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. American claim is based only on support of anti-Israeli activities of Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, since US and Israel attribute the terrorist label to arm resistance groups fighting against Israeli regime.¹⁷

The terrorism issue was a serious impediment of U.S.-Iranian relations long before it became the leitmotif of the U.S. approach to the world following 11 September, a point reinforced as recently as 2001 when Washington renewed its ILSA legislation (The Iran and Libya Sanctions Act). There is little prospect that the issue can be fully resolved between Tehran and Washington in the near future but if it can be disaggregated into its various elements there may be opportunities for limited progress.

Several especially sensitive aspects, if not fully removed from the equation, have become relatively quiescent. It has been a decade or more since U.S. public opinion has been inflamed by accounts of American hostages or horrific actions conducted against Israeli or Jewish institutions abroad such as the pair of highly lethal bombings in Argentina in the early 1990s that the U.S. has asserted were carried out by groups or individuals associated with Iran. Today the flashpoints revolve around the Middle East peace process, Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda.¹⁸

US Department of State's in his list of nations sponsoring terrorism has included the name of Iran since the list was created in 1984. In the past several years the Department of State has bolstered this designation by highlighting the close connections Tehran has with the terrorist organizations Hezbollah and Hamas. In April 2008 report titled *Country Reports on Terrorism* states that, "Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism." However, the Islamic Republic has denies any involvement in terrorist activities and considered as a fake claim that is aimed at international attention to pressurizing Iran.¹⁹

Iran-U.S. Relations: Israel as Factor

Israel plays a significant negative factor in the relationship between India and United States. Iran and U.S. have divergences over the role of Israel. The two countries have a very different stand over Israel. Israel occupies an important place in the American foreign policy. Iran has accused U.S. for adopting such policies in Middle East that works for the security and stability of Israel and at the cost of regional security. This can be reflected from the fact that if U.S. is pressurizing Iran to stop developing nuclear weapons development then it has a close linkage with the security of Israel. While, on the other hand U.S. have accused Iran for creating regional instability in the Middle East. Iran is not satisfied with the U.S. policy of supporting Israel against the other Middle East countries by providing them with arms and equipment and even money.²⁰

Israel has been a major non-NATO ally for United States, thereby providing economic, arms and equipment needs to the former. United States and Israel has signed the Strategic Cooperation Accord in 30 April 1996 between US president, Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Perez in which US made firm commitment to Israel security and following up the Middle East peace process and minimize any costs and risks for Israel. Moreover, US would have committed itself to keep Israel's superiority and military edge over its enemies and boost the

Israel's missile program. This statement has been the most important indication of US sensitivity towards Israel's security despite the fact that Zionist regime is the sole nuclear Middle East power and has unique conventional armaments and capabilities in the region. As a result of which, in all Arab-Israeli conflicts and wars, the American government, directly or indirectly supported Israeli regime and such a move is not restricted to the Democrat or Republican parties.²¹

What has really angered Iran is the American policy towards Middle East that is strictly aimed at serving Israel interest rather than serving regional interests. Israel on the other side is always making an effort to take United State along its sides on every Arab-Israel issues and even project Iran as challenges to the security of the Middle East. Israel has been poisoning U.S. against Iran by saying that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a serious strategic threat to the United States and its allies because:

- A nuclear-armed Iran would likely embolden the leadership in Tehran to advance its aggressive ambitions in and outside of the region, both directly and through the terrorists it supports – ambitions that gravely threaten stability and the security of U.S. friends and allies.
- An Iranian leadership which believes a nuclear arsenal protects it from retaliation may be more likely to use force against U.S. forces and allies in the region, the greater Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Nuclear weapons could thus lower the threshold for Iran's use of conventional force.
- A nuclear-armed Iran would likely exacerbate regional tensions. Israel would find it hard to live with a nuclear armed Iran and could take military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. A deliberate or miscalculated attack by one state on the other could result in retaliation, regional unrest, and an increase in terrorist attacks.²²

Iran-U.S. Relations since Obama Administration

President-elect Barack Obama has already changed policy, by repeatedly saying during the campaign that he would seek engagement with Iran without preconditions. What might have forced Obama to change the course on Iran nuclear issue? This can be gauged from the fact that during the tenure of Bush, the highest foreign policy priority was stopping Iran from going nuclear. The Bush administration even imposed economic sanction to isolate from the international community but without any success. Under the pressure of numerous economic sanctions, Iran has only hardened its stand on its right to enrich uranium.²³

When Barack Obama was elected to succeed Bush as the next President of Bush, there was lot of expectation in the international community and in particular to the Muslim communities, change in its approach to Iran issue and its relations with Iran. Everyone was expecting President Obama to reduce the damage done by his predecessor. How President Obama policy towards Iran would look like was evident from his announcement that he is keen to carry on negotiations with Iran's authorities, thereby ensuring that there is a progress in Iran-US relations. Some experts are expecting not only mere improvements are expected to be in Iranian-American relations, but also establishment of military cooperation.²⁴

Mr. Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs under the Bush Administration in charge of the Iran dossier, has publicly stated that in spite of "a very threatening posture towards Iran for a number of years" and its advocacy for regime change, the US has failed to obtain any strategic gains. Other CIA experts like Paul Pillar also commented on the same tune. As American 'Iranocrats' in the State Department (barely a handful) try to parse fact from fiction, contrary to conventional wisdom, it is closer US-Iran relations that will likely yield mutual strategic advantages. Both of these statements reflect the need to carefully engage Iran.

President Obama recently in his speech addressed to Iran and the Iranian people on the occasion of Iran's New Year celebration has expressed his hope for a new beginning for US-Iran relations. Whilst this exceptional step was welcomed by Iranians both within Iran and in the diaspora, reactions were understandably circumspect given the long and bitter history of US-Iranian relations. In response, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who occupies the most powerful position in Iran's political structure, declared that 'change change only in words is not enough'. He reiterated that concrete change in US policy towards Iran – e.g. lifting of sanctions – must materialize before improvement in relations can be expected. Tehran has however signaled it is prepared to engage in "constructive" talks. While still too soon to celebrate the marriage of Tehran and Washington, promising signs of détente are timidly emerging.²⁵

Prospects for Future Iran-American Relations

Ayatollah Khamenei has said that when the time is right to restore ties with the United States, he would endorse such a step. Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki echoed these sentiments, "Iran-

US ties would not remain severed forever.” History has shown that the United States does not have permanent enemies. Successful US-Iran engagement requires comprehensive diplomacy encompassing the core concerns of both nations. Engaging Iran will not necessarily guarantee stability in the Middle East and Central Asia. But failure to engage carries with it the substantial probability of more of the same.²⁶

The future prospects of Iran-U.S. relations lies in how the present American Administration proceed with the underlying issues between the two countries. For which many have offered suggestion on how the Obama Administration should response to these problems. Karim Sadjadpour, strategic analysts in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is of the view that avoiding the most contentious problems for the moment such as nuclear issue in favor of issues where Iranian and American interests overlap- such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. He further added that “If we immediately approach Iran and give them ultimatums on the nuclear issue and on Israel, the likelihood is that we'll forsake building confidence with them and bringing about more cooperative Iranian behavior on the other issues.”

The relationship between the United States and Iran is strategic, she argues, not necessarily tied to individual leaders in Iran. “As we constantly are looking for the next better Iranian president to deal with, we are giving up opportunities to put the relationship between the U.S. and Iran on a more strategic, constructive path,” she says. “What matters is ... that we see Iran as a country we can work with in our strategic interest, whether Ahmadinejad is the next president or someone else.”²⁷

Normalizarion of Iran-U.S. Relations

Going by the past and present status of Iran-U.S. bilateral relations, it seems to be very clear that both sides are not in hurry mood to normalizing relations that is significantly important for both countries. The two countries are not ready to give up their respective interests for the sake of other countries interests. The two countries and in particular to United States are not ready to show any flexibility in its stand over the various issues that have hindered the bilateral relations between Iran and United States. This has only worsened the misunderstanding and mistrust between the two sides. U.S. must review its policy of containment and isolationism vis-à-vis Iran.

Besides, the normalization of relations between Iran and United States would depend on the following.

- a. Normalization of relations must be in the interests of both countries.
- b. On nuclear issue, it is very important that U.S. adopt positive approach towards it. It is not the right way to say no negotiation before any halt of Iran nuclear weapons programme. This is not likely any fruitful result, instead it would only keep the option for Iran to continue its nuclear programme. There must be direct negotiation between the two countries.
- c. Both sides must have to make serious, concerted efforts to reconcile the differences that preclude a return to a more normalized political relationship.
- d. Political relations must be strengthened through the exchange of high-level official visits that would keep the option open for gaining lost understanding.
- e. Economic relations need to be restored that has a significant potential. The U.S. also continues to block Iran's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).²⁸

Conclusion

Any significant change in the nature of relations would require a lot of hard work. First step should be to remove the persisting misunderstanding and mistrust between the two sides. Also they must stop targeting at each other. Moreover, they should explore areas of potential cooperation between them.

Iran has always ruled out all American accusations and tried to divulge US unilateral, hegemonic and interventionist policies at international forums and to call global community to counter these approaches. Iran maintains to consider itself the victim of American interventionist policies in the region and believes part of the challenges facing Islamic Republic of Iran, including Iran-Iraq war, arose from the US direct and indirect interventions. Iranian high rank authorities called American policies toward Iran as hostile and aggressive, and urged Iranian nation to resist against it. Iran, particularly in the case of its nuclear dossier, has repeatedly denied accusations of pursuing nuclear weapons. Iran points out that it is party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and is entitled to import nuclear reactors and other technologies under the provisions of the treaty. The IAEA has regularly inspected all of Iran's declared nuclear facilities and reported on its full compliance with the NPT. It has found no evidence of diversion

to any nuclear weapon effort. Iran also allowed the IAEA to visit any site upon request and even officially declared it will welcome a consortium to administer the nuclear activities in Iran. It is equally important that Iran and U.S. find way to resolve the issue before it escalates into a bigger one.

The severing of diplomatic ties with Iran and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions and the freezing of Iranian assets, have achieved less than satisfying results for the U.S. U.S. cannot expect Iran to follow what it wants by adopting such stands that goes against the interests of Iran. U.S. instead of making efforts to isolating Iran from the international community should look forward to engaging Iran that would multiple purposed. The absence of formal diplomatic relations with Iran creates several challenges from a strategic viewpoint for the U.S. It invites misunderstandings and potential miscalculations between the parties.²⁹

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