Road to Nowhere

Why the United States Must Engage in True Diplomacy with Iran

By John Limbert

In a century on the Iranian stage, the United States has gone from stranger to friend to master to enemy. Beginning as a minor player, it then became a friend of Iran's struggling democratic movement; then a political puppet master supporting an autocratic monarch; and finally a sworn enemy determined to overthrow a defiant Islamic Republic. For the last three decades, the United States and Iran have been caught in a downward spiral of mutual hostility. The two sides have glared at each other across an abyss trading insults, accusations, threats, and sometimes worse. American officials talk about "mutual respect" yet call the Islamic Republic "odious" and insist that it must "change its behavior." Iranian officials, when asked how relations might improve, have nothing to offer beyond reciting a list of accumulated grievances going back sixty years.

Matters were not always this dark. The United States was originally on the right side of Iranians' century-long struggle for dignity, independence, and a government that treats its people, including its women, with decency. Now, however, both sides have become captive of bad assumptions, sterile slogans, mistrust, misreading, and ingrained hostility. Both sides now risk sliding into a disastrous and unequal armed conflict that neither country says it wants.

Escaping the grip of all this suspicion, resentment, and accumulated grievance will take more patience and forbearance than either side has so far demonstrated. The path of U.S.-Iranian relations is littered with the wrecks of efforts to change the rancor into something more productive in which the two sides can at least talk to each other—if not as friends, then as two states with interests that sometimes conflict and sometimes coincide. In the past three decades, when efforts to change the relationship and establish dialogue based on mutual respect and mutual interest have run into difficulties, both sides have

▷ Iranians storming U.S. embassy, Tehran, Nov. 4, 1979. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

reverted to the dysfunctional patterns of the past, saying, in effect, "Well, we are being reasonable, but how can we deal with *them* who are so (unreasonable, irrational, devious, stubborn, bullying, etc.)?" One side paints the conflict as an encounter between rational Westerners and unpredictable Orientals. The other side paints it as an encounter between bully and victim (or, in Imam Khomeini's words, "the wolf and the sheep").

Shahs and Great Games

The United States first encountered Iran (then known in the West as Persia) in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was an unfortunate time for Iran. Disastrous military defeats, bloody religious conflicts, economic decline, poor education and health, misrule, and corruption had brought Iran to one of the lowest points in its long and often glorious history. The historian Ervand Abrahamian estimates that during the 1900–06 period Iran's literacy rate was 5 percent and its citizen's average life expectancy was thirty years. There were no universities and only 2,000 students were enrolled in state schools.

Iran remained nominally independent thanks only to its position in the Great Game between Britain and czarist Russia. That nominal independence, however, did not mean that Iranians controlled their own affairs; both foreigners and Iranians under foreign "protection," enjoyed immunity from local law. The Qajar Dynasty ruler, unrestrained by any constitutional system until 1906, pawned the country's economic resources (including its oil) in return for loans and quick cash to finance his court and foreign trips. The country's only effective military force, the Persian Cossack Brigade, was led by Russian officers. The greatest humiliation came in 1907 when Britain and Russia divided a weak Iran into "spheres of influence," an arrangement that gave Russia a free hand in the economic and population centers of the north, while giving Britain a buffer zone in the barren southeast to protect its vital interests in India.

In this unhappy setting, in the early twentieth century, the small Iranian intelligentsia—both clerical and secular—began a struggle to limit the arbitrary power of the ruler and to make Iranians masters in their own house. Americans were mostly outside this struggle, and their limited involvement was usually positive: missionaries provided Iranians schools and hospitals; American advisors in 1910–11 worked with the new parliament to bring order to Iranian finances; and a young missionary schoolteacher, Howard Baskerville, became "the American martyr" in 1909 when he was killed fighting against royal forces seeking to suppress the new constitution.

World War II and its aftermath made America an important new factor in the Iranian political arena. The United States became a leading player in a new form of the Great Game, now called the Cold War (1945–91). In the original

nineteenth-century version, Britain and czarist Russia competed for influence in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran. In the updated version, the Soviet Union replaced imperial Russia and the United States took over the role formerly played by Britain. Iran, which had been just one piece of this game, now became a major prize and Iranian oil, which had not been a factor in the nineteenth century, now became part of the stakes. Communism—and anti-communism—added an ideological component to the contest.

Whatever its motivation, the United States held a generally positive position among Iranians until the coup of August 1953, which was backed by the Central Intelligence Agency. That action led to twenty-five years of close association between Washington and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Although there had been considerable American sympathy for the Iranian position in the dispute with Great Britain and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company over control of Iranian oil, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and his National Front in the end fell victim to Cold War calculations and American domestic politics. Mossadegh never seemed to appreciate the realities of the American political scene, while the British skillfully played on the rampant fears of communism infecting American society at the time.

Rule of the Mob

The United States initially hoped to salvage something from the turmoil of the Islamic Revolution and the fall of the Iranian monarchy in February 1979. Caught unaware by the fury and scope of many Iranians' hostility to the shah, the Carter administration continued to see Iran in Cold War terms, as a piece in an updated Great Game between competing superpowers. Since 1945, basic American policy had been consistent: keep the Soviets away from Iranian territory, the Iranian government, and Iranian oil. In doing so, Washington had chosen to back the shah and his government as the linchpin of this strategy. If the shah's system was brutal, inefficient, repressive, and corrupt, so be it. After 1973, when Iran gained a huge windfall from high oil prices, the country became an important customer of American exports, both civilian and military. Before the revolution broke out, an estimated fifty thousand Americans—many working on defense contracts—lived in Iran, and at least an equal number of Iranians, including students and military trainees, lived in the United States.

The United States, like most of the world, was unprepared when the shah's rule collapsed in 1979 following a year of protests and calls for Islamic government and an Islamic Republic. The first American reaction was an attempt to build a relationship with the new Iran—which retained the geography and the oil wealth of the old one—on the basis of shared hostility to the Soviet Union and Iranian suspicions of Iraq. The efforts foundered on the hostility of extremists of both right and left in Tehran. The

former suspected the Americans of using Iranians' anti-Soviet sentiments to recover their earlier influence and eventually destroy the revolution; the latter saw the Americans attempting to resurrect the anti-Soviet alliance they had made with the shah.

The final break began nine months after the revolutionaries' victory. In November 1979, in response to President Carter's decision to admit the deposed shah to the United States for medical treatment, a mob overran the American Embassy in Tehran. What had begun as a 1970s-style student sit-in became a major international crisis when the authorities in Tehran endorsed the mob action. The American staff became hostages for fourteen months, diplomatic relations were formally broken, and extremists used anti-American hysteria and "holy defense" against Iraq to take total control of the Iranian state.

Conventional Washington wisdom said that tempers would cool with the January 1981 release of the American hostages and the passage of time, and that after a few years officials of the United States and Islamic Republic would be talking—not necessarily as friends—about issues that mattered to both countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, narcotics trafficking, navigation in the Persian Gulf, terrorism by Sunni extremist groups, and (later) even Syria. However, those conversations have not happened, except in the most limited form. Instead, sixty years after the 1953 coup and thirty-four years after the 1979 embassy seizure, the estrangement persists and both Iran and the United States continue to nurture their grievances. Wounds still fester and events of decades ago cast long shadows over current relations.

"Goodwill Begets Goodwill"

The United States and the Islamic Republic have found themselves stuck for over thirty years on a road to nowhere. When officials—from either side—do seek to leave that road and change the relationship into something more productive for both sides, they are met with profound mistrust, misreading, misunderstanding, bad assumptions, bad timing, and sometimes just bad luck. Most administrations in Washington would have preferred to ignore Iran after seeing how the embassy hostage crisis of 1979–81 cost Jimmy Carter his presidency and how revelations of secret arms sales to Iran in 1986 shook Ronald Reagan's administration: apparently nothing good could come from dealing with Iran. Despite these disastrous precedents, in his January 1989 inaugural address, President George H.W. Bush made his "goodwill begets goodwill" pledge to Iran, but by time he ran for re-election in 1992 he had decided the political price was too high.

In 2008, Barack Obama, then a U.S. senator running for president, said he was ready to engage the Islamic Republic on matters of mutual interest. After his inauguration in early 2009, he launched an effort to begin a dialogue, demonstrating some

important symbolic shifts in American policy. He sent Nowruz (Iranian New Year) greetings to both the Iranian people and, pointedly, to "the leaders of the Islamic Republic"—a major change of language. He quoted Persian poetry, implicitly recognizing the historical greatness of Iranian civilization. He spoke of engagement without preconditions on matters of mutual interest and based on mutual respect. The last point, in particular, was something that the Iranians had always insisted was vital to any discussions.

Obama has had little to show for these efforts. Since he assumed office, there has been only one acknowledged high-level meeting between Iranian and American officials—when Iranian National Security Council chief and nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili met his American counterpart, then Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Burns in Geneva in October 2009. The two apparently reached an agreement about supplying enriched nuclear fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor; but the deal subsequently fell victim to Iranian mistrust and domestic politics, and to ill-considered remarks in Washington. Since that time, the Iranian side has denied there ever was such an agreement, and Jalili himself has avoided any bilateral discussions with his American counterparts at subsequent meetings between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (the five United Nations Security Council permanent members plus Germany) to discuss Iran's nuclear program.

Bad Luck, Bad Timing

Why has Iranian-American hostility persisted for so long? Why are the two sides unable even to talk about their differences? In a reasonable world, officials from Tehran and Washington—recognizing a shared interest in avoiding armed conflict—would be meeting discreetly and searching for the common ground on issues such as Afghanistan, where at least some interests coincide. These contacts might not lead to the reopening of formal diplomatic relations, but their absence need not prevent such meetings. Both sides could recognize areas where agreement is not possible and avoid sermonizing and asking for the impossible. American officials, for example, know that the Islamic Republic is not going to establish relations with Israel in order to please Washington; Iranian officials, for their part, know the United States is not going to endanger its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, for the sake of better relations with Tehran.

Bad luck and bad timing have played their parts in the stalemate. In May of 2010, for example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva negotiated a nuclear fuel arrangement in Tehran (the so-called "tripartite agreement") that would have delivered about 85 to 90 percent of what had been agreed to in Geneva eight months earlier. In this deal, Iran agreed to give up about

half of its supply of 3.5 percent low-enriched uranium (LEU) in return for 20 percent enriched fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor, which manufactures isotopes for cancer treatments. While the details of the Tehran and Geneva agreements were different, they were close enough for negotiators to work out the differences.

Rather than react to the agreement with standard temporizing of diplomatic language about "the need for further study and clarification" however, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rejected it immediately saying that the newly drafted UN Security Council sanction resolution was the best response. The issue became personal for me when, as a Department of State official, I had to explain her response (without guidance) to the Persian-language service of German radio. I could only guess that the problem was timing. As I sometimes do when I have no good answer, I took refuge in Persian poetry, a famous line from Ostad Shahriyar:

آمدی جانم بقربانت ولی حالا چرا؟

O, love of my life, you finally came to me. But why now?

What was possible in October 2009 was no longer possible eight months later. The political ground, both domestic and international, had shifted, and the U.S. government had invested too much into building international and congressional support for a UN sanctions resolution that required agreement from all five permanent members and at least four non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The Purity of Indignation

By early 2010, President Obama had found himself in the same situation with Iran as his predecessors—on a road littered with the wrecks of failed attempts to deal with the Islamic Republic. Successive American administrations, unable to ignore Iran, had attempted to bribe it, coerce it, isolate it, overthrow it, or make peace with it. A combination of mistrust, ineptitude, impatience, and bad luck on both sides had ensured that nothing would work.

Ten years previously, in late 2001 and early 2002, Iranian and American diplomats had worked together closely and effectively to create arrangements for a new government in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The American representative at those negotiations, Ambassador James Dobbins, has described how his Iranian counterpart played a vital role in convincing Afghan factions to cooperate and how the counterpart proposed that the Iranian and American militaries work together in training a new Afghan military. Those efforts collapsed, however, with President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech of January 2002 and his administration's hostility to anything that suggested common interest or cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

In Barack Obama, the Islamic Republic encountered its worst nightmare: an American president it could not portray as an enemy. The oligarchs of Tehran found themselves facing something much more dangerous than an enemy. They now had to deal with someone who quoted Persian poetry, sent them New Year's greetings, and spoke of "mutual respect." They were caught off guard. Reacting to George W. Bush and his axis of evil rhetoric had been easy. Reacting to the new reality, which discredited Tehran's traditional anti-American slogans, was much more difficult than the old practice of trading insults and threats.

It appears, however, that the Obama administration never appreciated the power of its new approach. Nor could the administration follow a promising but unfamiliar path. Rather than persist in a policy that was disarming a defiant Islamic Republic, Washington refused to face the uncertainties that came with this change of direction. At the first hurdle, the Obama administration seemed to give up and respond, "Well, we tried being reasonable, but how can you deal with anyone as irrational as *them*?" There was neither the patience nor the political will to pursue a different path with Iran. Nor was there the clarity of purpose for the administration to absorb setbacks and initial rejections. What did the United States want from its Iran policy? What was the goal? Was it a relationship that allowed the two sides to talk, even if they were not friends? Or was the goal a moderate Islamic Republic that acted more in accordance with American aims? Whatever the goal, the administration gave up quickly and reverted from the unfamiliar path of building a new relationship to the familiar and dysfunctional patter of denunciation and punishment.

By late 2009, the optimism of the earlier months had faded, and the Obama administration faced frustration. The flawed Iranian presidential elections in June had, from Washington's point of view, chosen the wrong person. Tehran authorities met protests from the defeated candidates' partisans of the "Green Movement" with brutal suppression by militias and revolutionary guard units. President Obama's second message to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sent before the elections and purportedly proposing dialogue and engagement, remained unanswered. The October 2009 agreement on fueling the Tehran Research Reactor had fallen apart, although (or perhaps because) President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed it was a good deal for Iran.

President Obama nonetheless continued to make gestures toward Iran. In a clear reference to Iran in his December 2009 speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, he stated:

> Let me also say this: the promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone. At times, it must be coupled with painstaking diplomacy. I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying

> purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach—and condemnation without discussion—can carry forward a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.

The administration, however, proved unable to follow the path its leader had laid out. Faced with frustration and a disappointing response from Tehran, Washington—while proclaiming its commitment to diplomacy and engagement—retreated into the policies it knew well, and that had failed to change anything in thirty years. It proclaimed a "two track" policy with Iran that would combine offers of engagement with increased pressure; the latter in the form of new economic sanctions, both unilateral and international.

All of this sounded reasonable when explained by official spokespersons, who talked about "helping Iran to change its calculus." They claimed pressure was not the preferred method, and explained, "It's not about sanctions first, it's about negotiations first."

In reality, however, there was only one track, and that was pressure. Administration officials found themselves spending most of their time and energy pursuing sanctions, and spending almost no time looking at possible engagement. It was not easy for the administration to create an international consensus—both within and without the United Nations—in favor of a new sanctions regime. Officials devoted much of their time to visits and phone calls with Russian, Chinese, European Union, NATO, and other counterparts. Internal meetings supposedly about Iran were 95 percent sanctions. Iran was irrelevant to the discussions.

Although creating new sanctions and negotiating with the parties involved was difficult and time-consuming, it was at least terrain familiar to American officials. Negotiating sanctions and punishing the Islamic Republic for its misdeeds was something they had been doing since 1979, and by 2009 they were good at it. American officials had built their careers on bashing Iran, albeit with no discernible positive results. But, after three decades of punishment, the Islamic Republic survived. It still pumped and sold oil at high world prices. It remained hostile to the United States and its friends. It showed no sign of modifying those policies on human rights, its nuclear program, and Middle East politics that the United States found objectionable. Although American officials could do what they knew, they were at a loss about how to undertake the "painstaking diplomacy" the president had called for in Oslo or how to give Iranians the "choice of an open door." Basically, what they did not know how to do was change thirty years of futility and frustration into a more productive relationship that would serve American national interests.

Iran Without a Map

In June 2010, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 1929 imposing new economic sanctions on Iran. Individual countries and international coalitions then went beyond UN measures in hindering the Iranian banking system, reducing or ending Iran's sales of crude oil, limiting investment in the Iranian oil and gas industry, and restricting sales of refined petroleum products to Iran. The U.S. Congress for its part has repeatedly passed new sanctions legislation against the Iranian government and individuals, and has mandated penalties against foreign companies that do business with Iran.

But, as Lewis Carroll put it in *Alice in Wonderland*, if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there, and all these measures lack any defined purpose. Without such a purpose, it has been impossible to define their success. If we do not know our goal, then how are we to know if we are achieving it or not? There are roughly three views about the purpose of sanctions, and each one has its own criteria for success. Depending on one's chosen set of goals, one can—with perfect justification—claim failure or success for the sanctions.

—The sanctions are meant to persuade Iran to negotiate seriously with the international community about the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. As stated in May 2013 to the BBC by U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, "As long as Iran is not willing to really answer the concerns of the international community… about its nuclear program then it will continue to face isolation and sanctions."

—The sanctions are meant to bring so much hardship to Iran that it will eventually give in to the demands of the international community in order to save the Islamic Republic from total collapse. This view replays the events of July and August 1988, when Imam Khomeini was forced (in his own words) to "drink the cup of poison" and accept a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war.

—The sanctions are meant to bring so much hardship to Iran that eventually a suffering population—perhaps helped by outsiders—will rebel against their oppressors and bring down the entire system. This view replays, in a modified version, the events of 1951–53 when an international embargo against Iranian oil exports severely weakened Mossadegh's Nationalist government.

By most accounts, Iran is facing economic difficulties from inflation, shortages of imported goods, closed factories, a falling currency (the rial), reduced crude oil exports, and an inability to access the international financial system. What defies

analysis, however, is which of the country's difficulties arise from the sanctions and which from mismanagement and corruption—long-running problems for an economy that should have prospered from high world oil prices. Those currently in office in Tehran have blamed their predecessors for mismanaging the economy, for using the sanctions to excuse incompetence, and for the inept diplomacy that has made so many needless enemies for the Islamic Republic.

Obligations and Rights

Although the U.S. and Iran have numerous grievances against each other, in recent years the question of Iran's nuclear program has become central to their exchanges. The issues are complex, but Iran, on its side, insists that its nuclear program is entirely peaceful, that it is in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and that it has the right to enrich uranium under that treaty. It also claims that it is ideologically and politically opposed to nuclear weapons. The United States, supported by its Western allies, insists that Iran has not met its obligations under the NPT, is hiding parts of its program, has not allowed international inspectors to visit key facilities, and is enriching uranium to a level beyond what is needed for nuclear energy production.

If the matters in dispute were entirely technical, there would be an obvious solution in which Iran would receive significant relief from economic sanctions and would be allowed to enrich uranium to 3.5 percent, the level needed to fuel power plants. In return, Iran would submit to rigorous international inspections and end any enrichment levels higher than 3.5 percent. Iran would also receive a guaranteed fuel supply for the Tehran Research Reactor under some variation of previous, aborted agreements.

The nuclear issue, however, goes beyond the technical. It has become so central and symbolic for both sides, that neither Washington nor Tehran is capable of making the concessions the other side says it needs. Ahmadinejad's provocative anti-Israel rhetoric and Holocaust denials have made the problem worse by placing the nuclear issue center stage and playing into the hands of politicians in Israel and the United States who present Iran and its nuclear program as an existential threat. In Tehran, people reportedly joke that Ahmadinejad was an agent of the Mossad.

The two sides have been talking past each other in repeated rounds of negotiations under the auspices of the P5+1. Yukiya Amano, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), noted in early June 2013 that after twelve rounds of negotiations between his organization and Iran—beginning in January 2012—the talks are "going around in circles." In reality the two sides are negotiating about different things. For the United States and its allies, the issues are Iran's "obligations" and legal matters such as levels of enrichment, Article 3.1, and the Additional Protocol of the NPT. For Iran, however, the issue is not its "obligations" but its

"rights." Behind those rights lie questions of sovereignty, national status, and Iran's place in the world. "Why," Iranians ask, "should we be penalized for doing what Switzerland and Finland are allowed to do?" To use Ahmadinejad's phraseology, although Iran has no plan to build nuclear weapons, only Iranians have the right to make that decision. In his speeches he insists that no outside power or group—not the United States, not the United Nations, not the IAEA—has the right to tell Iran what to do.

Behind these unproductive, "asymmetric" negotiations lie ghosts of history and two hundred years of Iranian grievance against foreign powers, particularly Britain, Russia, and the United States. From the early nineteenth century, those powers imposed and deposed Iran's rulers, stole its resources, occupied and seized its territory, and violated its sovereignty at will. In response to this story of victimization, the Iranians have often encountered oblivious foreigners who cannot understand these pent-up grievances, real or imagined, and who answer Iranians' insistence on gaining their "rights" with incomprehension and insistence that Iran must fulfill its obligations.

No Iranian politician can be seen as weak on what Iran insists are its rights in the nuclear issue; and no American politician can afford to meet Iran's maximalist demands. As long as the nuclear issue occupies center stage, there will be little progress or change in the long cycle of hostility. Compounding the problem is the fact that the other issues, where there is possible common ground, have become hostage to the blocked nuclear talks. The result has been an unbreakable stalemate in which the two sides engage in repeated and futile meetings then blame each other for the resulting impasse. Stuck in repeated failures on the nuclear issue, the sides cannot explore areas where agreement might be possible and where they might discover that, if they say yes, the sky will not fall.

In Search of a Small Gate

This paralysis has kept the parties on a road to nowhere and reinforced existing and negative stereotypes that Iranians are unreasonable dissemblers and that Americans are bullies who want only to break the will of a defiant Islamic Republic. Is there a way off this road? Is there a way for the United States and Iran to stop exchanging threats and insults and begin talking about their differences in a way that lowers the risk of armed conflict? Is there a way to achieve, in the words of an April 2013 Iran Project Study, "a pragmatic relationship that manages tensions and facilitates collaboration on issues of common concern?" In a more rational world there would be, but so far neither side has shown the patience, forbearance, and political will to act in its own long-term interest.

On the American side, officials need to put reality behind their oft-stated preference for negotiation over pressure. The so-called "two track" policy combining negotiations and pressure has been a farce. There is only one track, and pressure

(mostly by way of sanctions) has been Washington's single means of persuading the Iranians, although the aim of that persuasion remains unclear.

Americans have a poor record of reading the motives and actions of the Islamic Republic, which has its own politics and dynamics. Previous attempts to do so have led to fiascos such as Reagan's covert arms sales to Iran and George H. W. Bush's "goodwill begets goodwill" promise. The fact is that leaders in Tehran will make decisions based on their own logic and their own views—right or wrong—of national interest and national survival. Like almost all states in the region, the Islamic Republic feels threatened, and, even when evidence of threat is missing, can interpret events such as domestic criticism as proof that outsiders are bent on its overthrow.

In such a negative atmosphere, it will be very difficult for any American administration to convince Tehran that it does not seek to destroy the Islamic Republic. For Washington, however, there are some first steps that can be taken toward breaking the impasse:

—*Have Goals.* Make a list, as Richard Nixon did when he went to China in 1972, of "what we want" and "what they want."

—*The President Must Lead.* If the American goal is a different relationship with Iran, the president has to lead the process and lead the administration in pursuing that goal. He cannot leave Iran policy in the hands of officials who are victims of "oldthink" and know only how to impose sanctions and punishment.

—*Control Rhetoric.* Phrases such as "change their behavior" and "odious regime" have no place in diplomacy and only invite more futile exchanges. The June 2013 White House and State Department statements on the Iranian presidential elections, for example, are full of ungracious phraseology that feeds the Islamic Republic's anti-American propaganda machine. Such rhetoric also contradicts statements that the United States intends to engage Iran on the basis of mutual respect.

—*Have Patience and Forbearance.* With all of the residual hostility and suspicion, an open American hand will not be shaken the first (or second) time it is offered. There will be setbacks, but we should not give up at the first disappointment.

—*Look For Areas of Agreement.* The nuclear problem, because of mistrust and the high stakes involved for both sides, may be too hard to solve directly. The entire relationship should not be held hostage to a nuclear agreement. Instead, to break the wall of suspicion, the two sides should find other areas beyond the nuclear issue where agreement is possible.

These suggestions are not a magic formula for ending America's lengthy and unproductive downward spiral of hostility with the Islamic Republic. We may apply all of the above and still fail. What is certain is that what the United States has done for over thirty years has brought no result beyond, in President Obama's words, "the satisfying purity of indignation." The hostility and suspicion remains, and Tehran and Washington are still unable even to talk about their differences.

With Iran, it is clear for the moment that the large gate to a general settlement and a new relationship is closed. Each side has too many stored grievances and has made too many assumptions about the malign intentions of the other. What is needed is what the Hungarians call the *kiskapu*, the small gate, the loophole, where suspicions, negative preconceptions, bad assumptions, and political agendas will not block some narrow passage to progress.

Changes at this narrow gate may be small and symbolic: an agreement to meet, a prisoner quietly released, a handshake, a change in tone of public statements, or even something left unsaid. All these small things, applied with patience—plus an American presidential decision that the United States is determined to find a different relationship with the Islamic Republic—may enable us to step back from the brink of an armed conflict that will do irreparable damage to both sides.