

How and Why to Promote US-Iran Rapprochement

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- The author has been formulating this policy proposal for the *MIT International Review* since the arrival of the Obama administration in office.
- This is part 1 of Mr. Shoamanesh's two-part contribution on Iranian-US relations.

Introduction

Analysts from across the political spectrum agree that crafting a successful foreign policy toward Iran is a Byzantine puzzle. Notwithstanding President Obama's expressed preference for diplomacy, one may be inclined to interpret pronouncements made in Jerusalem and Washington as implying that a confrontation with Iran is inevitable. But is this conventional read of the Iran question accurate? 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. This is a sentiment echoed by other senior figures, including CIA experts like Paul Pillar. 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.

US-Iran relations are now at a crossroads – a rare opportunity that, after three decades of hostility, should not be missed. President Obama recently extended an olive branch in the form of an unprecedented speech addressed to Iran and the Iranian people on the occasion of "Nowruz" (meaning "new day" in Persian), Iran's New Year celebration. In a tactful expression of good will, President Obama 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

* The views expressed in this article have been provided in the author's personal capacity and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ICC, ICTY, the ICJ or the United Nations specifically or in general.

diaspora, reactions were understandably circumspect given the [long and bitter history of US-Iranian relations](#). As for the Iranian government, its reaction has been somewhat dismissive. Soon after the speech was broadcast, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who occupies the most powerful position in Iran’s political structure, declared: “[c]hange 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.

What follows is a list of agenda items – and their rationales – that the new US administration ought to consider to effect a strategic US-Iran rapprochement.

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1. Begin the Dialogue on Equal Footing

The reasons for engaging strategically with Iran are becoming increasingly clear to American policymakers. The region’s security and stability simply cannot be achieved without Iranian involvement. A recent invitation extended by the US to Iran to attend a summit on Afghanistan in March seems to suggest recognition of this reality. The US can no longer continue with its ‘policy of containment’ and neglect Iran.

To gauge the feasibility of US diplomacy in furthering its interests vis-à-vis Tehran, one question must first be answered: Can the Iranians be engaged in constructive dialogue given a political system deeply rooted in theocracy? The answer is yes. The Iranian government is at least partly guided by national interests, and is therefore sensitive to opportunities to gain strategic allies, minimize its risk through the use of proxy agents, enhance its military capacity and deterrence measures in the interests of national security, etc. Iranian authorities have shown themselves to be pragmatic, interest-driven strategists amenable to serious negotiations. Moreover, behind the veil of clerical power in Iran, there is a growing and increasingly influential technocracy that injects strong doses of realpolitik into Iranian decision-making. Hence, the claim that the Iranian government is fixated on a messianic message and on triggering a nuclear “Judgment Day” does not jibe with precedent or current developments. These caricatures are deleterious to diplomatic engagement and alienate potential allies in Tehran.

Dialogue has the most potential to be constructive when both parties are accorded equal status. On the diplomatic front, under the Obama Administration, the US has begun to recognize the Iranian government as a precursor to dialogue. The US must also admit its own role in souring relations. US reliance for more than 30 years on antagonistic language and tactics aimed at isolating Iran and undermining its government have not produced the desired outcomes. On the contrary, the language of force and hostility have played directly into hands of hardliner elements in the Iranian ruling establishment, recasting their reactionary anti-Americanism and inflexibility as standing up to a global bully. While the hardliner camp and their espoused philosophy in Iran benefit from the existence of enemies, real or concocted, a fair-handed approach will conversely strengthen the moderates and reformists in the country.

2. Don't Miss Any More Diplomatic Opportunities

To date, not only has US policy towards Iran failed to set itself on a constructive path, but it has time and again missed opportunities to improve relations. One reason sometimes cited for Washington's lack of initiative is its desire to wait for a promising Iranian politician with whom Americans can work – an Iranian Viktor Yushenko or Mikhail Gorbachev if you will. The Presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1999, the leader of the Iranian reformist movement, perhaps already provided just such an opportunity. The chance was curiously lost at a time when the “nuanced cleric” was publicly calling for a new era of US-Iran relations. It now seems remarkable to note that, following the 9/11 attacks, Iran offered to cooperate “unconditionally” with the US on its “war on terror.” Such cooperation went well beyond lip service: the Khatami government provided

crucial intelligence to the US on key Taliban and Al-Qaeda positions, which would later inform the US military strategy in Afghanistan. Similar Iranian cooperation was instrumental in the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Iran went even further and presented an unprecedented roadmap for the normalization of US-Iran relations. Major items in this [“Grand Bargain”](#) called for the US to abandon regime change in Tehran and lift all sanctions against the country. In exchange, Iran would tame Hezbollah and throw its support behind a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US State Department rejected this proposal out of hand.

President Khatami and his reformists were rewarded for their overture with Iran’s inclusion in the “axis of evil” – what amounted to a death sentence for the reformist movement that had called for cooperation with the West. The ultra-conservatives within the ruling establishment wasted little time pushing the reformers out of power. Millions of disenchanted pro-reform Iranians grew politically apathetic. Against this backdrop, Mr. Ahmadinejad, a former mayor of Tehran, seized the Presidency on an election platform pledging to clean government of corruption, improve the economy and focus the affairs of the state on major items, rather than let the infamous Islamic “moral police” loose to intrude into the private lives of ordinary Iranians. During his presidency, with minor exceptions, precisely the reverse has taken place. Worse, President Ahmadinejad’s fiercely revolutionary fervor and inflammatory public oratory have only served to convey on the country the status of rogue state.

In sum, hostile US policy towards Iran has not only been self-defeating but also detrimental for internal Iranian politics.

3. Recognize When, with Whom, and How to Dialogue

A new Iranian president will be elected in June 2009. Among the candidates permitted to run for election by the Guardian Council is the acting President Ahmadinejad; and Mr. Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh, an architectural engineer and former Prime Minister of Iran (before the post was abolished), who insiders believe may have real prospects of winning at the ballot. While a Mousavi Presidency might be particularly promising for US-Iran rapprochement and for the domestic revival of reformism, the Iranian political structure ensures policy continuity when it comes to sensitive issues such as US-Iran relations. On questions of foreign policy, command over the armed forces, and declaration of war and peace, ultimate decision-making authority rests not with the President, but with the “Supreme Leader”, Ayatollah Khamenei (as stipulated in Article 110 of the Iranian Constitution). At any given time, it is he who will ultimately exercise control over the normalization of US-Iran relations from the Iranian side. Washington should therefore begin the dialogue as soon as

possible, engaging the office of the Supreme Leader, in turn sending a clear message to Tehran that the US understands [the Iranian political structure](#) and is truly committed to dialogue.

For its part, Tehran must abandon its self-defeating rhetoric and through concrete actions, communicate its candid commitment to a new era of US-Iran relations grounded in good faith and mutual respect.

With three decades of effective Iranian isolation and a lack of formal diplomatic ties, mutual suspicion between the US and Iran remains entrenched. The two sides do not know what to expect from each other, or precisely how to behave in initial US-Iran talks. The US should expect that early talks will prove frustrating and that any union will at first feel more like an ‘arranged marriage’ between Tehran and Washington. Patience and commitment are required to effect a fruitful outcome and both sides must seize the moment to advance the interests of their respective nations through a continued commitment to diplomacy and partnership. Henry Kissinger is correct to suggest that the US must offer Iran a concrete proposal to induce a meaningful reaction from Tehran.

4. Engage Iran

4.1. Recognize the Benefits of Engagement

Since the 1979 Revolution, the US has chosen to cultivate exclusive privileged relationships with a handful of countries in the Middle East. Iran should be added to this VIP Middle East list conditional on meeting certain reasonable criteria. Such conditions might include, inter alia, requiring Iran (1) to meet human rights standards that would be uniformly applied to all of US’s partners in the region, and (2) to give up support for insurgent groups. Such a privileged partnership would yield important strategic gains for both nations. Iran is a large, strategically positioned, resource-rich, and regionally influential country. If the US wishes to remain relevant in the Middle East in the long term, it needs to maintain a strong relationship with Iran.

Engagement with Iran will undoubtedly be required to stabilize the world’s oil supplies into the future. Also, the US and Europe both stand to gain by supporting Iranian exports of gas from the country’s massive reserves to Europe as an added reliable gas supplier to the Continent balancing Russian monopoly and leverage over the flow of supply. Moreover, US industry could also benefit from normalized US-Iran relations.

Conversely, Iran could benefit more from its national assets than it currently does (as shown in Table 2). For instance, Iran under-produces natural gas relative to its reserves, and under-exports relative to its production. Likewise, in relative terms, its foreign exchange reserves outstrip its current investment rate,

which in turn outstrips the stock of foreign direct investment and the extent of industrialization (measured by industrial production as a percent of GDP). In all of these deficiencies, the US could help.

Table 2. Selected national statistics for Iran

Item	Number	World Ranking
Population	65,875,224	20
Natural Gas Proved Reserves (Millions of Cubic Meters)	26,850,000	2 after <i>Russia</i>
Natural Gas Production, 2007 (Millions of Cubic Meters)	111,900	5 after <i>Russia, US, E.U. and Canada</i>
Gas Exports, 2007 (Millions of Cubic Meters)	6,200	25
Oil Proved Reserves (Millions of Barrels)	138,400	3 after <i>Canada and Saudi Arabia</i>
Oil Exports, 2007 (Millions of Barrels)	2.8	3
Oil Production, 2007 (Millions of Barrels)	4.7	4
Gross Domestic Product (Purchasing Power Parity in Millions of US Dollars)	\$859,700 m	18
Reserves of Foreign Exchange & Gold (Millions of US Dollars)	\$ 96,560 m	16
Investment (as % of GDP)	27.70%	35
Stock of Foreign Direct Investment (Millions of US Dollars)	\$6,954 m	78
Industrial Production (as % of GDP)	4.5%	81

Rows shaded in gray, represent areas where closer US-Iran ties could produce mutual gains

All statistics from 2008 sources unless otherwise noted.

Source: *CIA World Factbook series, "Guide to Rank Order Pages."*

Other important strategic considerations are directly linked to Iran's geography. As the second largest country in the Middle East, Iran shares territorial borders with countries of great interest to the US (e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey), as well as former Soviet Satellite countries still very much under the influence and reach of the Kremlin. In the north of the country, Iran has access to the largest inland body of water in the world, the Caspian Sea, highly prized for its sizeable reserves of oil, estimated at over US\$12 trillion. In the South, Iran sits on the Persian Gulf, and the country has comfortable control over the Strait of Hormuz – the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the

open ocean suitable for petroleum exportation. Forty percent of the world's daily oil needs are transported through the Strait. Moreover, Iran has significant historical and cultural ties across the region.

In time, Iran could ultimately become a critical strategic partner for the US as it once was. The historical record has unequivocally demonstrated that relations with Iran will only yield durable benefits when the country has been engaged in an evenhanded and transparent manner. Successful diplomacy must respect the nation's sovereignty to act – through a corruption-free government – in the interests of Iran and its citizens.

4.2. Engage Empathetically

Too often US foreign policy towards Iran has been devised without a sophisticated appreciation for causal interactions within the wider Middle East region, or a deep understanding of the underlying interests that inform Iranian policy positions. So long as this remains the case, US foreign policy towards Iran will continue to bungle its chances. A nation, like the individual citizens that make up its polity, has a memory, a history, and life experiences that inform its collective behavior. If one is serious about understanding Iran and engaging it diplomatically, it is important from the outset to be familiar with its recent history. [The last 60 years has generated a long list of Iranian grievances](#) that weigh on US-Iran relations, among which the 1953 CIA coup, American support for the 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran, and escalating US sanctions all figure prominently.

The US should therefore recognize Iran will bring considerable mistrust to the negotiating table. The Thin-Skull rule applies to US-Iran relations – you take your 'victim' as you find him. Dialogue with Iran must first and foremost be sensitive to the causes of Tehran's and the Iranian public's resentment and feelings of victimization, and focus on building credibility. An official apology for the 1953 coup would go a very long way towards healing old wounds. It might even be paired with a request for a corresponding official Iranian apology for the 1979 hostage crisis.

4.3. Engage Knowledgeably

US policymakers should be sensitive to the generalized sense of Iranian vulnerability that underpins the country's perceived belligerence. The Iranian government's reliance on proxies like Hezbollah and its support for Shi'a minority populations across the Middle East are most helpfully seen as the products of an increasingly isolated post-Revolutionary Iran headed by a Shi'a dominated theocracy wishing to preserve itself and strengthen its regional

influence. Therefore, isolating Iran from the international community whilst neglecting the country's security concerns, will only encourage Tehran in its use of proxies and forging alliances with militant regimes to further its interests.

The US cannot reasonably participate in dialogue without understanding Iran's legitimate security interests in the geo-political reality in which it finds itself. Iran under the current government and the monarchies that preceded it has been subject to devastating expansionist wars. Tehran is therefore fixated on the possibility of external threats to its national security from regional and world powers. In the years since the Iran-Iraq war and America's concomitant support for Saddam Hussein, Iranian authorities have looked on anxiously as Iraq became the target of US military might in 2003 and communal violence spread in the aftermath of the invasion. More recently, Russia brazenly invaded the nominal territories of nearby Georgia. While current Russia-Iran relations appear cordial, the flexing of Russian muscle in Central Asia has traditionally worked to the detriment of Iranian interests and wars between the two countries have resulted in substantial losses for Iran of territories considered part of historical Persia. Moreover, although the most strident opposition to the brokered deal between the Bush Administration and Poland for the establishment of a missile defense system on Polish territory has come from Russia, analysts confirm that the deal was conceived to defend against Iran and its inventory of ballistic missiles. As some analysts suggest, Iran has stockpiled these missiles to deter against potential aggression.

In short, Tehran is apprehensive.

5. Find Common Ground in Iraq and Afghanistan

Initial diplomatic efforts should concentrate on reaching agreement in areas of common interest. This strategy would prevent tensions from mounting, build trust over time as agreements are reached, and establish a cooperative mood before tackling tough agenda items. These easier, confidence-building issues might include devising a joint policy towards Afghanistan and Iraq.

Iran will continue to have serious refugee and crime problems as long as these neighbors continue to suffer from civil unrest and social fragmentation. Iran already hosts some two million refugees from Afghanistan, with another estimated 100,000 from Iraq. The US on the other hand would require full Iranian cooperation in efforts aimed at stabilizing Iraq (and Afghanistan) and obtaining assurances that Iranian weapons will not find their way into the hands of Iraqi insurgent groups to the peril of American troops.

Another issue of mutual interest is the opium trade in bordering Afghanistan, which is penetrating Western markets and creating generations of addicts in Iran. It is estimated there are between two to four million drug addicts

in the country. Iran spends close to one billion US dollars annually to combat drug trafficking, losing thousands of police and security officers in the struggle each year. Moreover, Iran, like the US, perceives Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as its enemies, and supports President Karzai as a stabilizing force in Afghanistan. The recent regional Summit meeting held in Iran (where President Karzai of Afghanistan as well as President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan were present) is a clear indication of the important shared interests and challenges confronting these nations.

Progress in these areas will do much to improve US-Iran relations. By arriving at a mutually acceptable *modus operandi*, or at a minimum a *modus vivendi* in dealing with Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Pakistan, the US will have gone a long way toward addressing Iranian security concerns, giving itself in turn more leverage on the nuclear question or Israel-Iran relations. For instance, according to recent projections for troop deployments, Iran will have on its Afghanistan border alone a combined total of 100,000 American and NATO troops. Such measures are perceived as irritants to Iranian national security, and finding alternative arrangements that meet the needs of Iran and Afghanistan simultaneously would make it easier for the international community to extract concessions from Iran on the nuclear issue.

6. Decrease the Nuclear Threat by Building Trust

6.1. Avoid force and threats of force

Military threats ought to be taken off the table, as they only serve to strengthen Iranian resolve in obtaining nuclear deterrence and to confirm, in Iranian eyes, the strategic advantage of graduating from civilian to military nuclear programs. As a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has a legally enforceable right to develop a peaceful nuclear technology. Iran claims it is opposed to weapons of mass destruction and that its nuclear program is solely for civilian purposes. Further, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has thus far maintained Iran's nuclear program remains within the boundaries of peaceful civilian purposes, yet has been unable to rule out a military dimension due to the lack of full cooperation by the Iranian authorities after Iran's referral to the Security Council in 2006.

The country's nuclear program as it stands cannot reasonably constitute a *casus belli*. A military attack in current circumstances would constitute a violation of UN Charter and international law, further tarnish the US image abroad, open a regional Pandora's box and fail to achieve America's purpose. Military aggression against Iran would likely further radicalize the Iranian regime if it survives. Worse, it would breed anti-Western sentiments in the general

population, possibly strengthen the resolve of other regional powers to acquire nuclear arms, and polarize the international community. In the words of Mr. M. ElBaradei, Director General of the IAEA, “[i]f you bomb, you will turn the region into a ball of fire and put Iran on a crash course for nuclear weapons with the support of the whole Muslim world.” Words he reiterated in a May 2009 interview with Germany’s *Der Spiegel* magazine – this time, warning against the dangers of an Israeli strike on Iran. President Obama must commit to the diplomatic route to solve the nuclear question and in so doing, encourage Israel to the same path.

6.2. Refrain from Nuclear Sabotage

The US and Israel have in the past engaged in industrial sabotage operations aimed at derailing Iran’s nuclear program. To date, alleged tactics such as assassinating top Iranian nuclear scientist(s), using front companies and double agents to sell defective equipment to the Iranians, and damaging power lines to nuclear sites, have been reported by Haaretz, CBS News, and David Sanger, Chief Washington Correspondent of the *New York Times*.

While such tactics may be successful in creating provisional delays, they will not prevent the long run advancement of the program. On the contrary, such ploys will only push the Iranians towards a speedier completion, relying more heavily on covert black market deals and other less transparent sources to develop their program. Worse still, such maneuvers might produce an unsafe nuclear environment where a horrendous catastrophic accident could occur, similar to the Chernobyl disaster. Apart from creating further tensions, the fall-out and blow-back of such policy is self-defeating and must cease.

6.3. Adopt an Innovative Approach in Nuclear Negotiations

To counter the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, the US should adopt a negotiation strategy that does not deal with the issue in isolation, but rather as part of an integrated bargain that simultaneously addresses the country’s desires for energy, military security and perceived national ‘prestige’ to be acquired by joining the world’s nuclear nations. The US should initially engage Iran on friendly terms, then support the country in its pursuit of alternative sources of energy as it did during the Pahlavi dynasty and the Shah’s push towards nuclear energy. Terms of a US-Iran nuclear deal could include safeguards and trust-building measures. Promising initial steps would include encouraging Iran first to proprio motu ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, thereby clarifying its nuclear intentions, and then to implement the Additional Protocol to

the NPT, which the country has signaled it is willing to do if fairly treated. These steps would help ensure the program remains true to its stated civilian goals.

If Iran seeks alternative energy sources to free up domestic gas and oil for export, the US could offer Iran viable solar and wind technologies in exchange for a moratorium on industrial-scale enrichment. Iranian military security concerns may be assuaged by bolstered defense capabilities and agreed-upon mutual assurances among regional nuclear states, including Pakistan, China, India, Israel and Russia (a country that has recently made a non-apologetic push towards modernizing the nuclear capability of its military). For its part, the US could sign a non-aggression pact with Iran in the short term, while helping the region develop a supranational cooperation entity in the long term. An agreement would allow for increased economic and security inter-dependence in the Orient stretching from the Levant to the Persian Plateau. The resulting regional block might in time lessen the traditional tensions between Israel and its neighbors, as well as mistrust between Persian Iran and certain Arab states (notably Saudi Arabia).

Negotiations must, however, be carried out with utmost good faith. Due to Iran's history, the country's authorities, rightly or wrongly, perceive the West's objections to Iranian's nuclear program as bullying, and a further example of foreign hindrances to domestic progress. The negotiation strategy described above is sensible policy because it signals to the Iranians that the US understands the substance and origins of Tehran's desires and insecurities, and is willing to explore how they can be met, increasing in turn the likelihood of finding common ground on the nuclear issue.

7. Enlist Iranian Help in Forging an Arab-Israeli Peace Deal

Iran could help facilitate a feasible Arab-Israeli peace deal. There is no good reason why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should dominate Iranian politics the way that it has. The Jewish and Persian peoples share an inter-related history and a uniquely characterized camaraderie spanning thousands of years. The history of relations between modern Israel and Iran is also notable for the absence of traditional causes of inter-state tensions (e.g. land claims and wars). The Iranian people would prefer to see their government tackle important domestic issues (e.g., lack of civil liberties and limited employment opportunities) to having their country gain international notoriety for incendiary bombast. Further, many of Iran's privileged political class, while empathetic to the Palestinian plight, increasingly recognize that Tehran's stance towards Israel is prejudicial. Hence, while the ideological zeal of the ruling clergy elite and the desire of the post-revolutionary government desperately in search of legitimacy - guided by their

self-styled *savoir-faire* - oblige the latter to cling on fiercely to anti-Israeli rhetoric, Iran might be persuaded to shift its position on Israel if brought in from the cold. This of course is something the Iranians have signaled they are willing to entertain as evidenced by the 2003 "[Grand Bargain](#)." Lest we forget, Iran wields considerable influence on Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, Hamas. The country also has pull with Syria as well as a growing reach in the new Iraq. As such, it can play a very constructive role in the multi-lateral efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and support the Arab Peace Initiative (or any other agreeable peace plan).

8. Give Iran a Stake in the Global Economy

Another win-win formula is for the US to support Iran's modernization and reintegration into the global economy. The Iranian economy is slowly crashing after decades of sanctions, internal mismanagement, corruption and lack of investment. The situation is aggravated by the tanking of oil prices – on 23 December 2008, crude oil prices hit rock bottom at \$30.28 a barrel; today it is trading between \$35 and \$60 per barrel, down from close to \$150 per barrel in July 2008. Iran now finds itself in its most economically vulnerable position in years: the unemployment rate stands at a whopping 14 to 18 percent, and inflation is estimated at 26 percent. Both figures are due to increase in the coming months.

The economic situation is now opportune for finding political accommodation. Additional sanctions, already costing the Iranian economy billions of dollars annually, will add to the suffering of the Iranian people and further damage US-Iran relations and hence must be avoided. However, Iran's grim economic outlook constrains its political maneuvering room, allowing US negotiators to raise more items for discussion and gain greater traction on them. In this context, the US could offer a much needed financial incentive package to breathe life into the Iranian economy. The package would first call for the lifting of unilateral sanctions and trade bans on Iran. It would further encourage American companies to invest in the country, particularly in its wanting industrial sector. The package would also provide much needed technology and/or parts for Iran's aging fleet of passenger planes eroded by three decades of sanctions (a significant civilian health hazard). It would open US markets to Iranian goods. It would provide loan guarantees to allow foreign investors to inject capital into the Iranian economy. It could support and help develop Iran's untapped yet incredibly promising tourist industry; with thousands years of history, Iran is a touristic diamond in the rough.

In exchange, the US could call on Iran to meet certain pre-requisites before receiving the package. Listed in no order of preference, first, the US can shape a moderation in Iranian government's attitude towards Israel, requesting

that Iran lend its support to a viable two state solution. Second, the US should seize the opportunity to invite Iran to rectify its internal human rights record. Third, accords can be negotiated detailing inter-state cooperation on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Fourth, an acceptable agreement on Iran's nuclear program should be negotiated.

9. Frustrate Spoilers

In this courting exercise, the US must remain vigilant to ensure spoilers do not derail the process. Natural external candidates for this spoiler role potentially include Saudi Arabia, Israel, Russia, and large European trading partners of Iran. Internally, possible spoilers include hardliner elements within the Iranian establishment itself or unique class of vanguards created after the 1979 Revolution, who may all have a vested interest in maintaining the discord between Iran and the US. Given Iran's complex internal political environment, in which there is a constant contest for power between moderates and hardliners, hardliner acts perceived by the international community as questionable or even reprehensible must not be allowed to derail progress with the moderates. Recent examples of such acts include the regime's declarations in support of President Al-Bashir of Sudan after the warrant of arrest issued against him by the International Criminal Court in March; the recent fiasco concerning Roxanna Saberi, an Iranian-American, originally arrested on purported charges of espionage and later released; or the controversial speech of President Ahmadinejad delivered on 20 April 2009 at the United Nations anti-racism conference in Switzerland. An enduring commitment to bona fide diplomatic engagement will consolidate a moderate Iran.

10. Combine Popular and Formal Diplomacy

"Popular diplomacy" should not be underestimated in establishing closer ties. Educational and sporting events in the Olympics forum or otherwise provide structured mediums that foster direct cultural interchange, and should be encouraged. Exchanges and visiting scholar programs between American and Iranian universities are exemplary means of bridging cultures and sharing points of view. The vibrant Iranian-American community and the Iranian Diaspora in general, numbering some three million, can and must play an active role in invigorating this new union. In this newly established bazaar of ideas, mutual understanding, shared wisdom and friendship can flourish, facilitating and cementing gains made in the other track of formal, diplomatic inter-state relations. After three decades characterized by the atrophy of diplomatic ties, Iran and the

US should also establish embassies in each other's countries. Such a two-pronged strategy will lay the groundwork for successful negotiations.

11. Promote Democracy through Bona Fide Engagement

US policy in the past has consistently failed to enhance freedoms and democracy in Iran. The Bush Administration ostensibly tried to lend support to Iranian democracy movements through the Iran Freedom and Support Act (2006), not to mention grants administered by the National Endowment for Democracy. Success for such measures has remained a peculiarly tall order. After all, they originate from a country that until recently had openly called for regime change in Tehran. The prospects of such programs' success are rendered even more daunting in Iran where the state apparatus has little tolerance for voices of dissent, and can conveniently accuse any beneficiary of the American support of conspiring to overthrow the regime.

Improved US relations with Iran grounded on mutual respect and friendship will naturally bolster indigenous moves to create a more liberal democratic society. The vast majority of Iranians do not find delight in anti-American scapegoating. Iran's almost 70 million strong population, of which 70 percent comprise a highly educated young population, yearn for the same freedoms and employment opportunities enjoyed in the United States in their own country, and strongly favor closer ties.

The most effective arsenal to encourage a strong democratic Iran is not military in nature, but economic and socio-political growth. Open and democratic societies emerge not under the barrel of a gun, but in a nurturing and open environment that allows true freedom to emerge in time. In this "battle of ideas", it is civil society and reformers within the ruling establishment itself that will champion progressive causes when empowered by closer US-Iran relations – e.g., enforcement of universal human rights, enhancements and safeguards to democratic institutions.

In the long run, the only durable solution to Iran and the perceived difficulties the country represents for the US is the emergence of a fully democratic Iran. Yet true democracy is the hard-earned fruit of domestic labor reaped at maturity in the right season. The Iranian people remain steadfast in their pursuit of a full democratic expression to realize the words of the late Prime Minister Mossadegh: "there is no better way to govern Iran than democracy and social justice." The question remains whether US policy will facilitate or impede this progression.

Lastly, while skeptics may hold the view that engagement with Tehran will legitimize and therefore sustain the current political system, for true and durable democracy to be established with the territorial integrity of the nation

intact, it must be genuine and homegrown. The histories of countless nations, including Iran, have demonstrated this is the only manner to prevent gains being lost to inveterate cycles of internal upheaval and regression.

12. Adopt a Human Rights-Centered Diplomacy

Diplomatic dialogue represents a platform for the US to call on the Iranian authorities to meet their human rights obligations (e.g., under international covenants like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Iran has ratified in 1975 and 1994 respectively). This must be one of the prerequisite conditions of US-Iran negotiations. Under no circumstances should the US turn its back on the Iranian people and sacrifice their struggles and aspirations for human rights.

This human rights-centered approach has clear strategic advantages. Making respect for human rights a recurring theme in the new dialogue will give the US much needed credibility with the Persian, Arab and Turkish street. Disregard for human rights in US foreign policy has certainly proved counterproductive elsewhere. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where human rights abuses are as disturbing as in Iran – if not worse – the United States' unwillingness to address human rights concerns due to its strong financial ties with the Saudi royals has only enraged ordinary Saudis, exacerbating the country's extremism and breeding anti-American sentiments.

As US-Iran ties become stronger and the turmoil of the past decades subsides, long term strategy for the amelioration of human rights in Iran can benefit when feasible from the "ultimate" establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission by and for the Iranian people. The Commission will provide an accurate historical record, archiving instances of human rights abuses that have taken place in Iran since 1979 as well as reported violations of SAVAK, Iran's intelligence service under the last Shah's reign. The Commission will enable the nation to heal and provide recommendations to implement judicial and political safeguards to prevent widespread and systematic human rights abuses in the future. Full democratization and respect for human rights go hand in hand with justice, accountability and reconciliation. Iranians are the inheritors of a legacy, where their forebears not only conceived the Cyrus Cylinder, but actively participated in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Iranian people, like all citizens of an increasingly interconnected international community, deserve accountability and reconciliation when wronged, as well as an assurance their inviolable human rights are protected.

There is now an opportunity for the US to build credibility in the region and the foundation for a stable ally in the Middle East that will respect the human rights and integrity of its citizens.

Sa'adi, the celebrated 13th Century Persian poet cited by President Obama in his Nowruz address, expressed the timeless sentiment: "an enemy to whom you show kindness will become your friend." One cannot help but wonder where the two countries might be in the near future if the wisdom of these simple words were employed in US-Iran relations. Time for wondering is over; it is now time to act. Under the leadership of President Obama, a diplomat par excellence, the chance might just be seized.