

Iran's Emerging Security Environment and Relations with the United States: Dynamics and Prospects

Introduction:

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of Iran's security environment, challenges and opportunities with specific consideration to the critical nature of US-Iran relations and its current dynamics and future prospects. The paper initially will provide a background on the evolving nature of Iran's security environment and the historical factors affecting Iranian perceptions and policies. The paper then will address factors shaping Iran's decision making process and thinking on national security. The paper then will address the US-Iran relations in the context of common interests and areas of contentions and concerns. The final section will be devoted to several key observations on issues concerning Iran and the debate on Iran.

The Background:

Iran is a country that borders seven other nations, and it is located in one of the most crucial and strategic locations of the world. . It connects the Middle East, to Central Asia and Southwest Asia, and is located between the oil rich and strategically significant Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.

Iran maintained a border with the former Soviet Union, and it played an important role for the West during much of the Cold War. Because of its strategic location, its geopolitics and large oil reserves Iran drew the attention of both East and West during this period. Its domestic stability along with its alliance with the West was very crucial to the maintenance of Western interests. As an extension of its strategic significance, it became one of the pillars of the United States' twin pillar policy for the preservation of stability in the Persian Gulf. The events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution changed the geopolitics of Iran, an overnight transformation from being one of the closest and most strategic allies of the U.S., to being one of its most vehement opponents. Iran's threat perception and foreign policy priorities changed with respect to its immediate environment and the larger world at this pivotal juncture.

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) left a deep imprint on the minds of ordinary Iranians and policy makers alike. Iran felt alone in its war with Iraq, going from a Western client to fighting an Iraq who had the full support of important countries of the Arab and Western world. The most relevant factor in this analysis for this discussion is the use of WMD (chemical weapons) against the Iranians and Iraq's indigenous Kurdish population. According to Robin Wright, Iran lost about 50,000 individuals during the

course of the war as a result of the use of chemical weapons. The West and Arab world supported Iraq in its endeavors, providing military hardware, trainings, sometimes manpower, credits, and satellite imagery to a hostile and WMD-toting Iraqi force. The Iranians believed that the usage of WMD was a “red line” in combat that would not be crossed. To their dismay, they found out that international community in general and the West in particular either supported or ignored the use of chemical weapons in Iran. Witnessing such horrible facts Iranian elites reached a definite conclusion that Iran had to rely on its own resources for providing security for its citizen. They also concluded that the leaders of most powerful nations could easily be persuaded to ignore the crossing of a “red line” for shortsighted interests and the hatred of a regime in Tehran.

The next important event, which impacted Iran tremendously, was the collapse of the former Soviet Union. A new geo-politics emerged which changed the equation of threat and opportunity for Iran. Iran found itself bordering three new land neighbors, and two new states vying independently for the Caspian Sea access. A new geopolitics emerged: the increased chance to use the opportunities to cooperate with these countries was balanced by the immediate regional and the great power decision to isolate Iran, especially in area of energy, and the new and quickly erupted regional ethno- territorial conflict between new neighbors, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Afghanistan, due to the withdrawal of Soviet forces, there was a period of internal war between various Mujahideen factions which led to instability and a serious refugee issue for Iran. Iran also became a significant transit route for narcotics at this time.

These momentous events were synonymous with the coming to power of President Rafsanjani. Iran tried to play a more constructive role in the region and internationally as well. Iran’s relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors improved, and Iran’s relations with the Europeans and the East Asians also enhanced.

Relations with the US:

The U.S. coup de tat of 1953 in Iran and its subsequent support of the Shah during his quarter of a century dictatorial regime was an important factor in shaping the perception of Iranians toward the U.S. In post-revolutionary Iran, many were still suspicious of U.S. intentions and some Iranian university students stormed the U.S. Embassy, taking the American hostage for 444 days. The hostage crisis left a negative image of Iranians in the minds of most Americans. Later in mid 1980s during the Regan administration some attempts were made to improve relations with Iran; those attempts were buried with the Iran – Contra affairs.

President George Bush also noted in his inaugural speech in January 1989, clearly having the American hostages in Lebanon and the possible role that Iran might play in their release in mind, indicated that “good will begets good will”. The message was received well in Iran; Tehran facilitated the releasing of hostages in Lebanon. While officially neutral in Second Persian Gulf War, Iran supported the Operation Desert Storm. Rather than the reciprocal promise of good will, Iran became a target of the U.S.’s “dual containment” policy. Containment of Iran became an official doctrine during the Clinton

Administration and economic sanctions and toughening of visa restriction and cultural exchanges followed. With the election of President Khatami in 1997 in Iran, a new opportunity emerged for improving relations between the U.S. and Iran. Positive exchanges between the leaders of both countries was followed by the U.S. and Iran open expression of regret for the events of 1953 and the 1979 hostage crisis respectively. The positive atmosphere of the late 1990's, however, did not lead to concert actions. The hopes were that the United States and Iran would ultimately normalize relations within a few years.

With the election of President Bush and the horrible events of September 11th, a new security environment emerged which impacted both the U.S. and the Muslim World, Iran in particular. Immediately Tehran released an official condolence. Soon after the tragic event, Iranian citizens poured out into the streets to show solidarity with Americans, Iranian firefighters expressing regret for their counterparts in the United States. Across the Iranian political spectrum, including from the President Khatami himself, there was a strong condemnation of the attacks and terrorism in general. Nonetheless, "The War on Terrorism" became the motto by which Bush approached his presidency, and it became the primary objective of his administration. During the U.S. war against Afghanistan, Iran was instrumental in supporting the Northern Alliance and defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Iran and America both played an important role, cooperating in the constituting of a new government in Kabul during the conference in Bonn. Expectations were raised at this time that finally the end of the road of hostility was reached. Light could be seen at the end of the tunnel for a workable relationship once again between these two once allies.

Unexpectedly, Iran was accused of supporting Al-Qaeda, and Iran was included in President Bush's State of the Union speech as a member of the "axis of evil". In the minds of Iranians, this created an image of the Bush administration as one driven by ideology and intent on reshaping the entire region. Diverse forces with different political persuasions in Iran opposed the inclusion of Iran in the "axis of evil". They were convinced that U.S. intentions would be detrimental to the national interest of Iran. The U.S. war in Iraq generated a debate in Iran again. What should Iran's policy be toward the U.S. and the war? There were calls for neutrality or implicit support from a majority of the Iranian political spectrum. With the eventual dismantling of the Ba'ath regime, a new security environment has emerged which has created both opportunities and threats for Iran.

One of the most important impacts of U.S. policy toward Iran has been the securitization of politics in Iran, and the external negativity towards Iran. Everything in Iran became a matter of state security. Newspapers were closed down, political activists, along with academicians, were put in jail, and political parties were controlled or banned many on charges of being agents of the U.S. Externally, especially in the region, an informal US-inspired international "reward structure" emerged that promoted hostility towards or distance from Iran. Regional actors used this opportunity to receive US support in their presumably unified effort to contain the Iranian fundamentalist threat. Nations are calling for U.S. concessions to contain Iranian-style fundamentalism. A sense of mutual obsession which cut on both sides domestically and internationally

became the enduring characteristics of the US-Iran relations after the 1979 revolution. Occasional attempts at realistic assessment of the relations and hopes of possible rapprochement could not survive the intensity of the past and recent legacy of hostility and mutual frustration. Will the immediate or long-term future be the repetition of the past 25 years, or one should expect and hope for a different and better alternative?

Iran's National Security: The Environment, Policy Sources and The Decision Making Institutions

The Environment: The Center of Regional and Global Storms:

Three times in the last 25 years events of great historical significance have transformed Iran's national, regional and global setting. The 1979 revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the tragedy of 9/11 and the US response to it. The revolution changed not only the prism through which the external world was received and interpreted, but also how Iran was perceived and treated; Saddam's aggression and the disruption of relations with the US were the most consequential results. The collapse of the Soviet Union, changed Iran's geopolitics, removed the limited umbrella of cold war, and added both opportunities but mostly vulnerabilities by exposing Iran's northern frontier, compiling the problems of an already border/neighbor-saturated country. The 9/11 tragedy changed, one more time Iran's regional if not very national security environment.

One doesn't have to be sympathetic to the Iranian regime to see the incredible array of security challenges facing Iran. A simple look might tell the basic sketches of Iran's regional complex. In the north the stability of the Soviet time has been replaced by an intense new "great games" over the resources of the Caspian Sea, largely to the territorial and, political, economic, and environmental detriments of Iran. In the East first it was Soviet occupied Afghanistan, replaced by a hostile Taliban-led, and now run by the United States. Another neighbour in the East, Pakistan, while "friendly" on diplomatic face, supported Taliban, harbored the anti Shi'/ anti Iranian regional extremist movement, and it is armed with nuclear weapons. The Eastern front has also been the source of grave national security as the bulk of socially devastating drug trafficking to Iran's young population is generated from there. To the West is, Turkey, a NATO member, with strong military ties to the US and until recently a vocal champion of the theme of "the Iranian threat". And, Saddam's Iraq with his aggression and the *use* of WMD against Iran. Post Saddam Iraq is run by the United States, a country that considers Iran a member of axis of evil and openly talks about its regime change. In the South, where Iran national and strategic resources are located, the country again faces the United States.

Thus a true example of an international system that is based on "self help", Iran's "anarchical" regional environment has all the ingredients of an strategic nightmare: Too many neighbors with hostile, unfriendly or at best opportunistic attitudes, no great power

alliance, a 25 years face-off with greatest superpower in history, living in a war infested region (5 major wars in less than 25 years), a region ripe with ethno-territorial disputes on its borders (Iran has been a major regional refugee hub), and with a dominant Wahabi trans-regional movement which theologically and politically despises Iran, and finally a region with nuclear powers; Pakistan, Israel, and India. Iran is located at the center of the ‘uncontrollable center’ of post-Cold war and post-9/11 world politics.

Two points are worth emphasizing in understanding Iran’s national security environment. First, that assessing Iran’s intentions and policies, must out of rationality and not sympathy, take this taxing environment into serious consideration. Second, that in spite of this challenging security framework Iran has been able to maintain its territorial and political integrity, stability and considerable infrastructural development and an stable society, without external support.

The Policy Sources and Decision Making Institutions:

A detailed discussion of Iran’s decision-making process is beyond the scope of this presentation, but two points are worth emphasizing. First, the decision on major issues is not made by one person, or a particular group; no body and no institution, in real world, has such authority. Second, Iran’s decisions on key issues are made through consensus. Iran’s defense and security policies and decision-making are articulated by and developed in a composite of complex processes. A number of formal institutions, informal networks, personal relationships, and individual initiatives play a role in the formation of Iranian policy. From the outside, it may seem very chaotic and it is often difficult for outsiders to know who makes what decisions and how. However, the output of the system is consensually based. While the consensually driven process provides policy stability, it nevertheless makes reaching decisions more difficult and arduous. On major national security decision, while the elites have been too eager to factionalize and politicize the issues including relations with the US, but at the end great decisions are made through consensus. A consensus that is borne out of a painstaking process of give-and-take, public and private maneuvering, and at the end a “democratic” process in its own context, within a maze of incredibly complex labyrinth of interest groups and factions. The conservatives have significant power, but their rhetoric is both checked by their own sense of reality and serious challenge within their own ranks, and by the reformers. The ironic and positive role of the conservatives in charge should not be overlooked; they control the “real believers” and hot headed radicals; something that the reforms are not capable of doing. The difficult and so publicly made debate and struggle over the nuclear issue last week was made in such a complex environment.

Policy Sources:

The Iranian national security policies are influenced by and are made at the intersection of ideological factors which in addition to revolutionary and reformist Islam, it includes Iranian nationalism. Consideration over the economic prosperity of a very demanding population, the multi ethnic character of Iran and finally the geopolitical consideration play very significant role in informing and framing Iranian national

security decisions and policies. A critical point that needs underscoring here is that all these factors in one way or the other involves or affected by US-Iran relations. Four important facets are influential in the formulation of Iran's defense and security policies:

1. Ideological Sources: Three important ideological orientations are influential in shaping the security and defense policy in Iran: Revolutionary Islam, Reformist Islam, and Iranian Nationalism. Depending on the particular issue and the constellation of political forces, along with the international community, any of these three orientations can have a bearing on policy more or less. If there isn't consensus among these three camps, as is often times the case, there arises a serious problem in implementation.

2. Economic Prosperity: Iran's 70 million people have expectations of a better standard of living. A quarter century has passed since the time of the revolution, and the citizens of Iran are expecting better economic performance and government policy. Thus, the Iranian government is under serious pressure to perform. Iran has improved its economic relations with the rest of the world and also created infrastructure for foreign investment with the hopes of increasing domestic prosperity. On the whole, economic issues are exercising more and more influence on Iran's security and defense policies.

3. Multi-Ethnic Character: Iran is comprised of different ethnic and religious minorities. Many of these minorities have an affinity to their people on the other side of the geopolitical border. This has an important impact on the defense and security policies of Iran. Whoever presides in Tehran and wants to form a coherent policy must be wary of the multi-faceted nature of society.

4. Geopolitical Considerations: More and more, Iran's security and defense policies are being influenced by geopolitical issues. Instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, uncertainties in Azerbaijan and Pakistan, and Iran's maintenance of good relations with the Persian Gulf countries all have a bearing on Iranian policy. A wide U.S. presence in many of these areas poses a problem: there is no buffer, or physical space between Iran and the U.S. anymore; they are literally neighbors to the South, East, and West.

Decision Making Institutions:

A number of formal and informal institutions and organizations are additionally important in shaping security policy in Iran. Highest among the formal institutions include Iran's armed forces (both regular and revolutionary), intelligence, interior, and foreign ministries, Islamic propagation organizations, the expediency council, the office of the President and the Supreme Leader, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), and the Foreign Relations and Security Committee of the parliament. A number of informal organizations and individuals also have input in security policy issues. Depending on the nature of the issue, the interplay between these different organizations and institutions are different and their impact on policy differs as well. The ultimate outcome is a product of debates and negotiations between these groups.

The Supreme National Security Council of Iran plays a very important role in initiating, debating, aggregating and helping reach a consensus on security issues. All major players in the security apparatus of Iranian government have a representative in the Supreme National Security Council. Typically, decisions of the SNSC are abided. To violate a decision of the SNSC is usually associated with paying a heavy cost. This process was displayed last week, when the SNSC played a pivotal role in making decisions with regard to Iran's nuclear program. Though a number of hardliners and conservatives disagreed with the decision, and expressed concern with the decision, they ultimately abided by the decision. It is interesting to note that usually in the United States, the Secretary of State is perceived to be a more powerful individual than the National Security Advisor. However, in Iran as we saw recently, the role of the General Secretary of the SNSC was perceived as more central than that of the foreign minister. The General Secretary sat among the three European Foreign Ministers during the interview process, which indicates the power of the SNSC in making ultimate security decisions.

US-Iran Relations: Issues of Tensions and Concerns

There are several critical issues that have been at the center of US-Iran tensions especially since the early 1990's, namely Iran's nuclear program, terrorism and radicalism, the Palestinian Israeli conflict and the peace process, and finally the issue of human rights. While the degree of significance and relevance of each might differ, they have collectively become important issues of concerns in US-Iran relations.

1. Iran's Nuclear Program: Iran began its nuclear program in 1974 during the Shah's regime with the perception that oil is a finite resource that would ultimately be exhausted. Ironically, the U.S. supported that initiative. The statements that are being heard today-- that Iran doesn't need nuclear energy due to its vast oil and gas reserves, were never made before 1979. This inconsistency is still a confounding issue in the minds of many Iranians. They are surprised that with a population twice the size of pre-revolutionary Iran, and oil consumption exponentially higher, the U.S. would argue this point of contention at this point in time. Simply put, this argument is viewed as politically motivated argument particularly in the context of today. Five domestic views can be identified with regard to Iran's nuclear program.

- a. Small numbers of people argue that due to environmental and economic reasons, nuclear energy is not a necessity for Iran. Arguments have been that the cost of investment for generating a kilowatt of electricity is more expensive using nuclear energy than it is with other means. Behzad Nabavi, the powerful deputy speaker of parliament and one of the influential leaders of the reformist movement, is a supporter of this view (ISNA, 15, 08, 2003). This seems to be the American position as well.
- b. A much larger group argues that Iran needs nuclear energy and should acquire nuclear knowledge and technology. They argue that this is an economically wise decision (investing in alternative forms of energy) and in terms of pride and prestige, many would like to acquire that knowledge and technology. It is seen as technology of the future, and no country should be deprived of having access to

- such knowledge and technology. They argue that the very point of Iran's joining the NPT was to have this access and technology. Many university students, hundreds of faculty members of Universities, and officials and elites Iran wide are supporters of this policy. The European, Japanese, and Russian governments support this position.
- c. Some hold the conviction that Iran should have access to nuclear technology and be able to use nuclear energy for civilian purposes but it should develop neither nuclear weapon capability or nuclear weapons. Because they will not enhance Iran's national security; violate Iran's international commitments; contribute to regional proliferation and will be detrimental to Iran's relations with the other states. They are in favor of Iran's signing of Additional Protocol, are supportive nuclear disarmament and are critical of the U.S. overlooking Israel's nuclear weapons which works against creating a nuclear free zone in the Middle East. The possession of nuclear weapons by other states, including Pakistan and Israel tend to weaken the proponents of this view in Iran.
 - d. Some would argue that we should not only have nuclear technology for alternative sources of energy and a source of knowledge, but would also argue that the capability for nuclear weapons should also exist. For the supporters of this outlook, the security environment of Iran considering the usage of chemical weapons against it with no complaint from the international community, and Iran's threat perception necessitate that this capability exist. There is a nuance that should be considered in this perspective. Some argue that the capability to produce fuel for the reactors must exist. Their main concerns are not typical security per say, but rather that they may have to be dependent on others for fuel if they are not self sufficient. This rises from the uncertainty of having access to the necessary fuel for the reactors. The other portion of the group would argue that it is in fact important for Iran to have all the necessary elements and capabilities for producing weapons. Of course, they only want the capability, not the weapons. The capability alone is an important strategic deterrence in their view, and can have a positive contribution to Iran's defense and national security policies. There are quite a few influential people who support this perspective.
 - e. A small number of people argue that Iran should withdraw from the NPT and move to develop weapons as soon as possible. They believe that Iran should pay the price of international sanctions if necessary. They cite the hostility toward Iran and Iran's security environment, and say that the weapons would make an ideal deterrence. It would preserve its territorial integrity, provide reliable security and enhance Iran's status in the region and the world.

The first and last groups have few supporters in Iran. They are seen as extreme positions. A majority in Iran supports b, c or d views, including the elites and governmental officials. It would be very unwise of the U.S. to press for the first position, because that would be perceived by a majority of ordinary Iranians and elites alike as indicative of hostile intentions of the U.S. In other words, the U.S. would want to deprive Iran of achieving knowledge and technology to help better itself. An insistence on this position will serve to unify diverse forces in Iran against the Americans.

The U.S. has already applied severe economic sanctions to Iran in order to change the behavior and attitude of Iranian officials in regards to terrorism, WMD and Arab-Israeli conflict, but as we are witnessing, none of the objectives of these policies have been achieved. According to the State Department, Iran is still at the top of the list of terrorist supporters, Iran still opposes the peace process as the U.S. sees it in the Middle East and according to the IAEA, Iran has also had vast improvement in its nuclear infrastructure and capability. Some would argue that much tougher sanctions by the international community would force Iran and those who support weaponization of Iran's nuclear program to quit, but if indeed Iran is determined to achieve nuclear weapons (although this author does not believe that Iran is), it has the capability to do so. Their resources, for example, are significantly better than that of Pakistan to achieve this objective. Thus, additional sanctions will more than likely be unsuccessful in convincing those in Iran who would like to see a weaponization of Iran's program.

It should also be pointed out that the surgical military attack on different nuclear sites in Iran (either by Israel or the U.S.) would only enhance and strengthen the will of the Iranians in going forth with full nuclear weaponization.

Additionally, Iran has sufficient resources in Iraq, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the Persian Gulf, Lebanon and other places to escalate the tension. Iran's capabilities in these areas, policy makers in Iran believe, should have enough deterrence for those contemplating a surgical attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Such a surgical attack, also, would have to be unlimited and total for it to be successful, which poses dangers that could be unimaginable. With the coming presidential election in the United States, and the US difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan, this seems an unlikely option. Iran's sense of pride and independence and their capabilities and the lack of support for such action by even the most hostile anti-Islamic Republic forces would make this action further unrealistic.

A related issue is Iran's missile program. Asking Iran to stop or dismantle its missile program would simply not work. Considering the missile attacks by Iraq in the course of Iran-Iraq war, and missiles importance and roles in defense policy, Iranian military planners were convinced that it is imperative for Iran to invest in missile research and development. Iran has successfully tested mid-range missiles-Shahab 3. As a part of comprehensive solutions to problems between the U.S. and Iran, Iran may be persuaded to stop developing longer-range missiles and also can be persuaded to deploy the already tested Shahab 3 from a particular point in its territory, which cannot reach sensitive areas in Europe and Israel. A verifiable regime can be agreed upon to check these deployments. These would be important confidence building measures.

2. Terrorism: Two kinds of terrorism can be distinguished: Politically oriented terrorism and ideologically oriented terrorism. Politically oriented terrorism is an extension of politics. A cost benefit analysis is present in a calculation of politically oriented terrorism. Thus, if in someone's calculation the benefit of politically oriented terrorism outweighs

the costs, the possibility of action increases. Suicide bombs in Israel can be included in this category. Hence, it is very much possible that if a “reasonable” offer is proposed to the Palestinians, suicide bombing can be stopped. It is much easier to deal with this type of terrorism than the other kind. Ideologically oriented terrorism is inherently and fundamentally a different kind of action, though the consequence of action and the outside appearance of such acts may seem the same. In this type of terrorism, the actor performs a duty regardless of consequences. Consequences are part of the calculation of those who partake in politically oriented terrorism, while in ideological terrorism consequences are secondary in importance. By performing these acts, the actor has been promised true victory no matter what the specific outcome of that event might be. Though it has been said that politically oriented terrorism is easier to deal with, ideological terrorism is more difficult particularly in fighting extremist Islamic terrorist actions.

Islamically oriented radicalism is on the rise in Islamic countries. It seems that the Muslim masses, elites, and intellegencia have come to the conclusion that the Islamist alternative to secular ideas is more promising. There is introspection in Islamic countries as to why they are behind the West in a number of important areas of social life, and they feel that their lifestyle and belief system is in danger by the imposition of sets of alien values through globalization or their Western supported governments. They believe a return to Islam, to an idealized past or an Islamically constructed utopian in the future is the solution. There is a belief that this idealism can be brought to the here and now. They are willing to fight with whatever force they deem is an impediment to the realization of their objectives. If these forces were their governments, or supporters of their governments, they would fight with them. Their commitment to this cause is not a rational cost/benefit analysis. The only way you can fight with them and deconstruct these ideological underpinnings is through an alternative reading of Islam which seems both modern and authentic. Tanks, Missiles and other state of the art military hardware are not appropriate weapons for fighting these kinds of wars. In other words there is no military solution for this kind of terrorism. In Iran, reformists’ construction of Islam is the antidote to that radical construction. In fact, a successful reformist government in Iran and a reformist construction of Islam-which has already been articulated- is the best prescription to fight with the radical ideological construction of Islam. In the hearts and minds of many Muslim intellectuals and intellegencia, it is the Reformist Islam-a reading of Islam which is compatible with modernity- that appears very native, authentic, and appealing. The West like the Muslim world has an interest in seeing the victory of reformist Islam in its battle with extremists Islam.

Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad: It is wrong to lump different organizations of different stripes together, and to try to prescribe the same course of action in dealing with them. Iran’s relation to each one of these four organizations is different. Iran’s relations with Hezbollah in Lebanon are much closer than to the others. Across the political spectrum in Iran, there is support for Hezbollah. To them, Hezbollah is not only a force which fought for an end to Israeli occupation of Lebanon, but also a representation of Shiite rights in Lebanese society. Iran is a predominantly Shiite country, which feels a strong affinity with the Lebanese Shiite

community. In Hezbollah, we also find differences of opinions like we do within Iran itself. There are hardliners, conservatives, and reformers that preside within the party of Hezbollah. Thus Iranian reformers feel closer to reformers in Hezbollah, and conservatives to their counterparts in Hezbollah as well. In the eyes of the Iranian reformists and popular supporters of the reformists, there is the view that Hezbollah is not involved in acts of terrorism. If Hezbollah were to engage in more radical acts that would be easier to distinguish as acts of terrorism, the Iranian reformers would react accordingly.

There is generally support for the Palestinian cause among Iranians, but approaches vary. With regard to Hamas, there is a different type of relationship. Though conservatives and hardliners support Hamas, this support manifests itself rhetorically and psychologically. Certainly, the sympathy that exists between conservative Iranians and Hamas is weaker than that between many Arab countries and the latter group. With regard to Islamic Jihad, Iran has a slightly closer relationship (hardliners in Iran). However, Iranian reformers perceive both Islamic Jihad and Hamas as radical organizations, which hurt the Palestinian cause. For the Iranian reformers, the Palestinian Authority represents the Palestinian people. In other words, they support the PA. Iran can play a very constructive role should they be asked seriously to take a positive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They might be able to exercise some influence on various groups, for example.

With regard to Al Qaeda it should be noted firstly that Iran has never supported this group. In fact, for the past 5-6 years, they have been engaged in a proxy war with Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's actions are in fact considered extremism even in view of the Iranian radicals. Even before September 11th, Iranian policy makers across the political spectrum condemned Al Qaeda's actions and its naive construction of Islamic ideology. Post 9/11, Iranians have continued to vehemently condemn Al Qaeda's actions. After the U.S. overthrow of the Taliban and their fight with Al Qaeda, quite a few Al Qaeda members escaped to Iran. Many of them have been arrested, some of them being sent to their countries of citizenship. Still, quite a number of them are in custody in Iran.

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam however, a peculiar relationship between the U.S. and the MKO (Mujahideen Khalq Organization) has emerged. The MKO is an Iranian opposition group which has fought violently with the Iranian government since the early days of the revolution. They have killed many Iranian officials and non-officials along the way. Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, the MKO cooperated with Saddam in fighting with Iran, and also it is widely believed it was used as a suppressive apparatus by Saddam against Shiite and Kurdish forces. On the one hand, the Mujahideen has been listed as a terrorist organization on the State Department's list. However, some forces in Washington have argued that the MKO can be used as an instrument to apply pressure on the Iranian government, be a counterbalance to the Badr Brigade, collect intelligence for the US, and participates in possible acts of sabotage against Iranian interest. Iran is receiving mixed signals from Washington with regard to the status of the MKO. Sometimes, it is claimed that they have been disarmed. At the same time, there are reports that they are in a position to be rearmed if necessary. Thus,

the issues of Al Qaeda and the MKO are tied together in a sense. Iranians would not accept the U.S. on the one side preaching moral clarity in the fight against terrorism, while finding an interest in supporting an organization that they themselves label terrorist on the other hand.

3. The Peace Process: Although Iran's official position is a one state solution in Israel and Palestine, Iran has publicly announced that it is ready to accept a two state solution if the Palestinians do. Although Iranian leaders have publicly opposed the peace process and verbally attacked Israel, they have repeatedly said they would not do anything to sabotage the peace process in practice. For sure, there is a dispute in Iran with regard to dealing with this issue. A majority of Iranian reformers have already publicly announced that they support a two state solution, and they oppose extremism of both Israelis and Palestinians. These reformers have been accused by the conservatives that by making such statements they are betraying the Palestinian cause.

4. Human Rights: The issue of human rights is very much alive in the Iranian domestic political scene, and Iranians are debating and fighting among themselves on this issue. A number of debates have emerged reconciling human rights and Islam, which has significant impact on the Islamic World. Many individuals and institutions have been engaged in supporting human rights issues. Thus, there is an important constituency inside of Iran that demands its government respect and promotes human rights and vehemently opposes the violation of those rights by any institution. There are many different NGOs in Iran, which directly or indirectly deal with this issue. The recent reception of the Nobel Peace Prize by Iranian Shireen Ebadi, a human rights activist, has strengthened the morale of human rights supporters in Iran.

The U.S. has not been consistent in its demand for the observation of human rights in Iran. At times, it has emphasized human rights, and other times it has used it as a means for pressuring Iran. For sure, a double standard of U.S. application of human rights issues to Iran and not its allies with worse human rights records has served to politicize the issue. Support for human rights, if not used as a means to pressure Iran, can be a genuine objective of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. The U.S. should be sensitive of domestic issues, and pay attention to debates within Iran instead of superimposing its own standards inconsistently on Iran.

If U.S. policy makers are truly interested in non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, a bold and new initiative should be adopted in dealing with Iran. The U.S. should also be supportive of the second Iranian position on nuclear issue like the Europeans, but should also address the two most important considerations of the third position. Iran should be assured of reliable source of fuel and legitimate national security concerns of Iran should be addressed. A Middle East free of nuclear weapons, and a collective security arrangement, which can include the U.S. and others, and bilateral security assurances to Iran all should be explored. In general the nuclear issue can be part of a comprehensive approach to solving Iran-U.S. problems. None of the Iranian requests are outside the bounds of the NPT. We have lost many opportunities in the past, and we have both paid

the cost of these blunders. Both Iran and the U.S. have important common interests. The issues of concern to both sides should be addressed in a bold and comprehensive way.

Through engagement, and not containment or intensification of hostility, the U.S. can address its legitimate concerns and interests. This would be welcomed by Iran. In return, for cooperating with the U.S. on these points, Iran has some concerns and demands as well. The most important of these would be the recognition of its revolution and perceiving Iran as a normal state and supporting Iran's legitimate and constructive regional role. Again it should be repeated that this may seem symbolic, but it indeed plays a very important role in the minds of Iranian policy makers. As an indication of such a changed perception by U.S. policy makers, a number of major measures should be adopted by the U.S: For one, sanctions should be lifted. As it was stated before, they do not have the intended outcome anyway, but they pose a psychological barrier for Iranian policy makers. Second, U.S. should not be an impediment toward Iran's ascension to the World Trade Organization. Last week, the U.S. again prevented Iran from initiating the process of joining the WTO. Third, the unfreezing of Iranian assets is also very important. Fourth, changing rhetorical dynamics of demonization will have a major impact. And finally, a preliminary move, which will have a major positive impact in Iran especially among the public is the easing of visa restriction for family visits, academic purposes and cultural exchanges. This will not be a costly measure but its impact will be very significant. After all no Iranians were involved in 9/11 or any terrorist activity in the United States; the pouring of sympathy for the US on this tragedy in Iran was and remains constant. A collective punishment that actually has been unusually tough on Iranians who try to visit the US has been very damaging.

US-Iran Relations: Areas of Common Interests

While the relations between Iran and the United States have been signified by hostility and lingering issues of concern, the two countries, ironic as it may appear, have significant common interests with considerable countervailing potential and the weight to overcome the differences and the tensions. These common interests are most significantly expressed in the desire of both countries for regional stability in the Middle East, the Caspian Basin and in Southwest Asia. A common desire which has given a new and urgent impetus in post-9/11 era and the subsequent US military intervention in the region.

1. Afghanistan: Iran has a long and porous border with Afghanistan, and the security and stability of Afghanistan are very important to Iran and America alike. Having a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran, having lost more than 3000 Iranians in fights with Narco-Terrorists, and the presence of cheap narcotics in Iranian streets have made Iranian policy makers determined in seeking a stronger and stable central government in Afghanistan. The United States also has an interest in a stable and secure Afghanistan because of its fight against terrorism. Narcotics are also a problem for the U.S. and more notably Europe. Rather than competing with one another, and perceiving one another as a threat which can jeopardize the entire situation in Afghanistan, it is imperative to

cooperate for the sake of the prosperity and improvement in Afghanistan. Depending on U.S. posture toward Iran, Iran has the ability to either use its infrastructure to play a constructive role in Afghanistan or do otherwise.

2. Azerbaijan: With the coming to power of Ilham Aliev and his deficit of legitimacy the possibility of subsequent instability in Azerbaijan is high, yet unresolved disputes with Armenia, and a large population of Azeris in Iran, Iran has an interest in seeing a stable and prosperous Azerbaijan to its North. The U.S. also has similar interests in Azerbaijan. Both nations therefore must help ease tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Rather than making it a point of contention between two countries, and adopting exclusionary policies, Iran and the U.S. should cooperate and would benefit greatly from mutual respect. Any U.S. support for an Azerbaijani irredentist movement in Iran, discretely or indiscreetly, will be perceived by an overwhelming majority of Iranians as a hostile act.

3. Pakistan: Both Iran and the U.S. have interests in seeing a nuclear Pakistan not turn out to be a failed state. The rise of extremism in Pakistan and the multiethnic nature of Pakistani society, the prevalence poverty, and its contention with India can lead to a situation which will pose a danger to the region and to the world. Stopping narcotic traffic through Iran, maintaining secure borders, the Baluchistan minority problem, and the preservation of the rights of Shiites in Pakistan are very important issues for Iran. Included among these is the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. The U.S. has an interest to see an extremist controlled and democratic Pakistan which does not place nuclear weapons in the wrong hands as well. Both the U.S. and Iran would like to see control of extremist elements within Pakistan.

4. The Persian Gulf: Iran and the U.S. both have an interest in the safe passage of oil in a stable and secure Persian Gulf. Stability of world energy markets through cooperation and coordination between producers and consumers is in vital interest of both countries and world community as well.

5. Iraq: While all major US regional concerns and preoccupations somehow involve Iran, none has the immediacy, weight and far-reaching regional, global and domestic implications of the future of Iraq. The enormity of the US stakes in Iraq needs no explanation; what is not often acknowledged or appreciated is Iran's role in Iraq's future. Beyond the US, Iran is and will be the most influential and relevant state actor in Iraq. Not only Iran's proximity, but significant though until now suppressed, historical, institutional, personal, and religious ties, in addition to Iran's knowledge of Iraq and its intricacies, underscore its significance and relevance. A hostile US –Iran relations, especially one with built-in coercive military and economic measures, will make a successful reconstruction in Iraq very difficult if not impossible. One can easily assume the same in Afghanistan.

Since Iraq is a pressing issue at this point in time, I would like to expand on it in more detail. Overthrowing the Saddam regime was the easier part of the Iraqi crisis. Establishing peace and security, winning the terrorism war and convincing the Iraqi, Arab and Muslim masses that America is not an occupying force and is not planning to plunder

Iraqi oil and wealth, and it does not have a grandiose plan for reshaping the Middle East map are much harder tasks to achieve. Radicalism in the form of terrorism and suicidal bombers will certainly increase against Americans and would be considered as few remaining options for Arab and Muslim who perceive the exercise of U.S. power very unjust and detrimental. Over the course of the last few decades, Saddam's Ba'ath party apparatus destroyed every feasible form of civil society and prevented the emergence of any autonomous associations and institutions. He ruled through terror and fear.

The resemblance with pre-revolutionary Iran is striking. The only remaining autonomous institution in 1970s Iranian society was the clerical network. Mosques were an important public space available to masses and elites for debating and adopting goals and objectives for their collective actions and designing strategies to achieve them. This is the case in today's Iraq. The Shiite clerical network, in Iraq as well as in Iran, is relatively hierarchical, with the Supreme Jurisprudent at the top, learned Ayatollahs in the middle, and the lower ranking clergy among the people in the rural areas and small towns. The pinnacle of the hierarchy expands from Qum to Najaf (the two main centers of learning in Iran and Iraq respectively) and consists of deep relationships between the clerics of the two cities. The structure, content and language of their training are almost identical. Inter-marriage between them further solidifies their relationship. This establishment has influence both within Shiite villages and towns in Iran and Iraq. Even withstanding the rivalry that exists between these two centers of learning; substantial influence can be transmitted from the Qum's clergy to Iraq, and from the Najaf's clergy to Iran. Historically, this has indeed been the case. The return of a relatively large number of senior clerics who have been residing in Qum as a result of Saddam's repression, along with the Badr Brigade and other Iraqi exiles, will seriously influence the course of events in Iraq. It is reported that a number of Shiites who have returned from Iran are already in positions of governance in Iraq.

This powerful clerical network presents an organized force with the ability to set objectives, and ultimately set an agenda for society. Given the current power vacuum in Iraq, the clerics are best positioned to organize and mobilize the masses. This is the case, not only among the Shiites but also among the more religious Sunnis. Mosques are excellent resources at the disposal of the clerics' for facilitating these processes. The potential exists for a very powerful socio-political movement to be generated by this force under the slogan of: "No to occupation, yes to democracy." A review of recent events in post-war Iraq underscores the potential power of this idea. Demonstrations under this slogan are indeed becoming the most visible expressions of "homegrown" empowerment.

Iran is in the position to influence greatly the tide of events in Iraq. It can, if it chooses, complicate the situation in Iraq by fueling the anti-American mayhem, or it can play a constructive role in containing extremism. The initiative of calling for Iranian cooperation is now in the hands of the United States. Iran and the U.S. share a number of crucial interests (territorial integrity, stability, fair representation for Shiite majority and WMD disarmament) in Iraq. The current climate of U.S.-Iranian relations does not lend itself to such a bold initiative. However, with the future of Iraq and the final verdict on

the utility and legitimacy of U.S. intervention in the balance, this opportunity should be taken not only to improve relations with Tehran, but also to lay a more solid foundation to manage the ever-complex socio-religious and political fabric of the Iraqi polity and move towards a stable and prosperous Iraq.

The significance of Iran-US relations in Iraq must also be understood in the larger context of the perhaps unintended consequence of the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the “Sunni minority” rule and the eventual dominance of Iraq, in one form or other, benevolent and democratic as it might and should be, of Shiites in Iraq. The geo-religious and geopolitical map of the Middle East will never be the same. The two most powerful Muslim states of the Persian Gulf/Middle East, Iran and Iraq, will be controlled by Shiites. While some people in Washington may argue for an American policy based on the emergence of an intra-Shi’i rivalry between Iran and Iraq, that tempting paradigm, lacks, appreciation of the transnational and translocal nature of relations between Qum and Najaf, the clergy in Iran and Iraq, and the depth of historical, personal, and blood ties between the two sides. One should not underestimate, in addition, the centrality of Najaf and Karbala for the entire edifice of Iranian worldview, emotion and identity. A closer or normalized Iran-US relationship means not only better bilateral ties, but rather a much-improved situation in the larger social, ideological and political milieu of the Muslim world that includes millions of Shi’is spread throughout not only in Iran and Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, the volatile Indian sub-continent, Africa, Lebanon, and the rest of the Arab world including the Saudi Arabia.

Observations: Iran’s Domestic and Regional Conditions, and Relations with the United States.

Several key observations could result from an overview analysis of Iran’s strategic conditions, its domestic prospects and its relations with the United States; issues that have been subject of discussions in both countries and especially in the United States. Consideration of these issues will be essential in the understanding of Iran, and the contemplation over the future prospects of her relations with the United States.

1. **Iran’s Centrality and the Myth of Isolation:** Iran is the most important linkage state in the Middle East. For the reasons of its geography, its revolution and ambitions, and its peculiar and jealously guarded sense of independence and thus centrality, all issues of importance in the Middle East from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, proliferation, terrorism, future of Iraq, stability in Afghanistan, future of relations between Islam and the West, regional political change and reform, Persian Gulf security, to access to secure energy both in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian, etc., either by default or design, run in one way or the other, through Iran. Isolation of Iran is not an option. What underscores this centrality is the significance of US-Iran relations in shaping Middle East dynamics; no other factor in the last 25 years has had a more transformative impact on this region than the Iranian revolution and the hostile nature of US-Iranian relations.

2. Iran's Loneliness and Independence: A key characteristic of Iran's external condition is its essential strategic loneliness. Partly the result of the revolution's character and nature, and partly self inflicted, this loneliness, which was most dramatically displayed during the 8 years war with Iraq where all major regional and global powers including the United States supported the "Butcher of Baghdad" and his gas making and gas using machine, has resulted in a national and elite-shared psychology that favors self sufficiency in defense, lacks trust in the efficacy of international institutions and great power alliances, and thus emphasizes reliance on its own resources, both mental and physical for national protection and defense. While the real and opportunity cost and damages of this imposed or selected self reliance have been enormous, it has nevertheless also interjected and infused a sense of confidence, pride, ability for crisis management, and internal development of native recourses unparalleled in the region. This combination of loneliness, independence, and self-sufficiency underscores both Iran's cautious attitudes towards regional conflicts on the one hand, and its bold, and even tough style on issues of principle and national significance. You are dealing with a seasoned elite that while displaying idiosyncrasies of its own in loosing opportunities is quite capable of maneuvering in real crisis, not only with regional states, but also with great powers like the United States. Do not underestimate Iran's power; a power that is not necessarily nor primarily physical. The subjective staying power is considerable, especially in times of crisis. This is particularly all the more true as Iran, thanks partially to the United States which surgically removed Iran's enemies in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq, is currently in its most favorable geopolitical position since the revolution in 1979.

3. The Myth of the Regime Change: There has been a lot of talk and conversation about "regime change" in Iran especially after the President Bush's "axis of evil" speech, and more so after the victory in Iraq, in Washington; a conversation that has been heavily influenced by certain elements of Iranian expatriate community and some of the influential think tanks. I think, such analysis is primarily driven by politicized information, tainted and self serving opposition-supplied knowledge. The regime in Iran has many difficulties for sure, and even more serious shortcomings and flaws, many of which are in open display in peoples' daily life, thought and conversations in the country, but it is a regime firmly in control, and is not about to and will not be overthrown by a few declarations in Washington. Discussion of the domestic condition in Iran is too complex of a subject to be treated here, but a few fundamental facts are worth mentioning.

First, although the conservatives in Iran are a minority, they are in control of many resources. They have leadership and organization, an ideology that binds them together and commits them to the cause, control of coercive apparatus', economic and political resources, and they have social and cultural propagation means. They are also well linked with their constituency. All of these characteristics and resources make them a very potent force. Reformers, many of them the former radicals, who additionally control important resources, are also not supportive of externally engineered change in Iran

Second, the real, organized impetus and energy, both intellectually and politically for reform and change is generated from within the ruling elite itself, and not from outside of

the regime; notwithstanding the presence of others in the struggle for reform. There is a real, and serious ideational struggle within the regime itself over the very identity and substance of the Islamic Republic which is not subject to simplistic wishes and dictates of outsiders. The reformers are neither pro-US nor anti-US; they have a much larger and historical agenda in mind which is the establishment of democracy in Iran in harmony with its cultural and religious traditions; an experiment with far reaching ramifications not only for Iran but for the post-9/11 Muslim world in general.

Third, the elite, both conservatives and reformers, and the public at large are quite intense if not “paranoid” about the sense of independence and dignity of the country and thus very sensitive about outside interference and meddling, especially in the case of the United States, which has not had so bright a record with Iran in this regard. US meddling, especially attempts of few people in Washington at manufacturing “regime change” through expatriate oppositions, covert plans, etc., will weaken the reform efforts, will unify the elite and will signal a beginning of real confrontation with the United States in the region. Iranians want peaceful a change and through nonviolent means. It should be a domestically driven change, and they would like to bring change within the established framework of the Iranian polity. Any foreign induced radical change will not be well received by the population. Among a ten million-person population in Tehran, less than 10,000 people participated in last summer protests because they were largely perceived as externally inspired or manipulated. The debate on nuclear issue for example, among others, underscored also the important caveat that Iran’s domestic scene does not lend itself to simplistic analysis; hundreds of the same students who protested in the Summer, and praised by the United States for their anti-regime demonstrations, strongly and openly warned against Iran’s acceptance of demands beyond the IAEA additional protocols and inspection, while many of the conservatives who forcefully had denounced the students’ movement , eventually lined up for the approval.

Fourth, while there is real frustration in Iran and outside about the pace of reform in Iran, the reality is that there have been significant and irreversible changes in Iran; frustration over unmet and justifiably high expectations should not overshadow that fact.

Finally, the real subjective and objective check on Iran’s elite, both reformer and conservative, is the looming fear of lack of domestic legitimacy. An imperfect Republic, the pride and the asset of the regime for the last 25 years, in spite of external loneliness, however, has been that it has sufficient popular support, that it is not lonely at home. The public frustration over the unfulfilled promises of the reform movement, not the fear of US attack, is the number one worry among the ruling elite. This concern for sure is not felt universally and equally among all, but it has certainly become, in immediate years, if not months ahead, will remain, the most important preoccupation of the regime. This is not a regime, that though capable objectively, can rule for long without a sufficient sense of public legitimacy.

4. Domestic Reward Structures and the Mutual Demonization: To a large extent and in both countries, Iran-U.S. relations have become domestic political issues and hostage to its intricacies and dynamics. A reward structure has been established in the United

States, which supports anti-Iranianism, irrespective of merit. Anti-Iranianism is cost free; yet calling for dialogue can be costly. A number of congressional bills have been introduced in the U.S., which under normal circumstances should have not been passed by Congress, but they pass with overwhelming ease. Similarly, in Iran the same reward structure exists for anti-Americanism. In Iran, those who have called for rapprochement with the U.S. have paid heavy price, being labeled publicly and sometimes have lost their job. The mutual language of denouncement and name-calling, while reflects the burden of historical mutual mistreatment, it has acquired a life of its own; the changing realities on the ground and real interests of both sides has little bearing on the intensity and serious damage of public denouncement and mutual demonization. Words have enormous consequences; they form perception and cultural and mental straightjackets, which impedes considerations of real and rational mutual interests. For the sake of the interests of both countries, this reward structure should be dismantled.

5. Iran and the US: The Losers?: The biggest losers of the 25 year old US-Iran hostility have been the Americans and the Iranians themselves. While both have scored tactical gains against each other, but one can make the argument that both have suffered strategic loses in the process. Regionally, many countries, ranging from those with secular claims of identity including Saddam Hussein's Iraq, to other Arab dictatorships in orthodox clothing, to more recently emerged post communist dictatorships in Central Asia tapped into the US-made anti-Iranian "reward structure", which in the pre-Al Qaeda world also meant anti-Islamism. Distance from or hostility towards Iran/radicalism, was perceived to be the prerequisite for being in line with the US, and became the justification for policies such as domestic repression and development of alternative and harmless Sunni fanaticism; ironically one of the hidden dynamics that gave rise to Saddam's regional ambitions as champion of secularism and later under-the radar development of a region-wide Islamic extremism. In the realm of geopolitical space of great power involvement, regionally Russia seemed to be the winner, by simultaneously milking and using its relations with Washington and Tehran cross-currently against the other, having strategic partnership with both! and limiting the maneuverability of the United States and Iran. Also critical has been the emergence of Europe, the EU, as perhaps the most important player in the global position of Iran; a role which has only increased after the encounter with the United States in Iraq, and underscored by the high drama display of Europe's diplomacy last week on Iran's nuclear issue. European, Russian, and even Chinese, economic and political gains have been and would be significant, mostly at the expense of the United States and not necessarily to the benefit of Iran.

Conclusion

This is the most critical time in US-Iran relations. A quarter century of US-Iran cold war is almost over and the two countries, having exhausted all the space for proxy war between them, have now entered into a new cycle of direct proximity and relations that is qualitatively different from the past 25 years; the prospects and options are increasingly limited to either a direct confrontation, or a major reconciliation. Iran and the United States, after the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are not only virtual but real

physical neighbors. The direct and over-the horizon US presence in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia and the Caucasus, is being complemented by the US physical presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. For all practical purposes the borders of Iran with those two states are the borders of Iran with the United States.

The result of this real contiguity is that any qualitative intensification of the conflict will lead to a physical clash, the consequences of which are extremely serious for the national interest and security of both countries. Iran is for sure very vulnerable to US military and coercive measures; a target reach country with a very demanding population Iran will be significantly hurt. But so will, though to a lesser degree, the United States. If people in Washington are now worried that the US is not doing well in Iraq against Saddam's supporters or disgruntled Iraqis, and the future of the US global interest and even its very security is dependent on success in Iraq and Afghanistan, one can imagine the level of difficulty the US will experience, especially in Iraq in case of an intense confrontation with Iran. Iran is well pre-positioned, perhaps given the typical trepidation on such a confrontation with the US, to make life for the US in Iraq very difficult; a democratic Iraq ala post-War Germany, as a showcase of US success will be out of the question; a Lebanon after Israeli invasion will be a better metaphor.

While the prognostication for the disastrous impact of the confrontation is obvious one can also assume the positive revolutionary impact of US-Iran reconciliation and rapprochement. A normalized US-Iran relationship is the missing link in the geopolitical, geoideological, and geoeconomic structure of the Middle East and global politics. The United and Iran while ideologically constructed to become enemies, in reality are unusual and in a sense unnatural and odd enemies. This oddity is reflected in the fundamental reality that neither has gained anything but insecurity and political headaches and setbacks from this hostility, the enemies of one turn out to be the enemies of the other (remember Iran went through an 8 year war and half a million casualties trying to remove Saddam Hussein and almost went to war with the Taliban -its sworn enemy- in 1998!). This oddity is also reflected in the appreciation of the fact that resolution of most issues of concern for the United States, as mentioned before, significantly and directly involves a better relationship with Iran.

It is high and urgent time, that a new concerted effort be made on both sides to move away from confrontation, and instead to engage in real, open, equitable, and serious dialogue for reconciliation; the national interests of both great nations and international security demands it.