

U.S.-Iran Relations: Normalization in the Future?

by Judith S. Yaphe

Key Points

Since World War II, few countries have been of greater strategic concern to the United States than Iran. Whether as a dependable friend and preeminent regional partner or as an implacable enemy, Iran has occupied a special place in U.S. security thinking. It exerts influence on a range of important policy issues—from the Middle East peace process to post-Taliban Afghanistan—and when it acquires nuclear weapons capability within the next decade, it could become a significant factor driving U.S. and regional government policies on proliferation.

Since September 11, there has been much speculation in both countries about the possibility of a new opening in relations. Like America, Iran wants an Iraq without Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan under a stable government, and Central Asia absent Russian control of borders and resources. Yet dramatic breakthroughs in U.S.-Iran relations appear unlikely. Iran's reformist and conservative camps may be actively debating whether rapprochement with the United States is in Tehran's future, but no signs indicate that the conditions for achieving normalcy would be minimally acceptable to Washington.

U.S. options must encompass several factors that shape decisionmaking in today's Iran: the rise of Persian nationalism, the consensus among leaders on foreign and security issues, the weakness of President Mohammad Khatami in the face of conservative obstacles to reform, fears of encirclement, and a bias toward self-sufficiency in defense posture. American policy can open a door, but Tehran must decide if and when to walk through it.

The Burden of History

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the United States has tried to find a framework for understanding this enigmatic country. America defended its commitments to help an ailing Shah in exile but was ill prepared to deal with the crises that raged in and around Iran in the 1980s: U.S. diplomats were held hostage in Tehran for 444 days, militant clerics tried to export revolutionary Islamic governance across the Gulf, and Iraq invaded Iran, ostensibly to stave off a Shia Islam tide wave.

During this period, U.S. policy toward Iran was relatively uncomplicated. Iran under the mullahs had tilted the balance of power in the Gulf by threatening its neighbors, encouraging antiregime liberation groups, and supporting terrorist groups determined not only to overthrow so-called anachronistic regimes but also to eliminate foreign presence from the region by targeting American, British, and French interests. Iran was branded a pariah and embargoed from receiving outside military or investment assistance. This policy would later be called containment. In the 1980s, it meant helping Iraq in the 8-year war, reflagging Gulf shipping, banning arms sales to Iran, and trying to free nearly two dozen Western hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorist factions in Lebanon. U.S. efforts to find a "moderate" Iranian leader with whom it could deal rather than a "radical" were met with scorn.

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iran began a process of institutional and attitudinal shifts—some perceptible, some imperceptible, especially to the American eye. The focus of power shifted from the person of

the Grand Ayatollah to the offices of the Supreme Leader, a cleric chosen by Khomeini to serve for life, and to the secular (but still clerical) president, both of whom lacked the charisma and credentials of a Grand Ayatollah. In addition, Iran began looking toward the Gulf and Europe for commercial contacts, financial investment, and diplomatic networks. Meanwhile, U.S. containment of Iran became more institutionalized. Iran was to be kept in isolation under sanctions until it renounced support for international terrorism, stopped opposing the Middle East peace process, and ceased efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Iran responded with demands that the U.S. military pull out of the Gulf, repay Iran the money owed it from the time of the Revolution and under dispute at the Hague, and stop trying to subvert its government.

Most European governments publicly criticized American policy as too restrictive but privately hoped that it would continue so that Europe could avoid unwanted competition. Their response was *critical dialogue*, which they viewed as a means to trade and recover assets while engaging the Iranians in discussion on disagreeable issues, including some human rights cases, the status of the Iranian opposition in Europe, and the Middle East peace process. Critical dialogue, however, fell victim to ineffectual Iranian and European diplomacy, as well as to revelations in a German courtroom that senior Iranian leaders had approved terrorist operations in Europe. This development led to the indictment of Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian and, in turn, Iran's refusal to allow the return of

Report Documentation Page		
Report Date 00 Jan 2002	Report Type N/A	Dates Covered (from... to) -
Title and Subtitle Strategic Forum U.S.-Iran Relations: Normalization in the Future	Contract Number	
	Grant Number	
	Program Element Number	
Author(s)	Project Number	
	Task Number	
	Work Unit Number	
Performing Organization Name(s) and Address(es) Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defense University 20319-5066	Performing Organization Report Number	
Sponsoring/Monitoring Agency Name(s) and Address(es)	Sponsor/Monitor's Acronym(s)	
	Sponsor/Monitor's Report Number(s)	
Distribution/Availability Statement Approved for public release, distribution unlimited		
Supplementary Notes The original document contains color images.		
Abstract		
Subject Terms		
Report Classification unclassified	Classification of this page unclassified	
Classification of Abstract unclassified	Limitation of Abstract UU	
Number of Pages 6		

European Union ambassadors to Tehran. Meanwhile, Iran continued its quest for new and unconventional weapon systems and the long-range missiles needed to deliver them. Until Khatami's election as president in 1997, Iran made no discernible progress in extending relations with Europe or its neighbors, and the United States remained anathema. When Khatami won his first landslide electoral presidential victory in 1997, America was still locked into a containment mindset: Iran was a rogue state whose behavior had to be modified before it could be accepted back into the international community.

Since September 11: Missed Opportunity . . .

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon evoked contrary and confusing reactions in Iran. President Khatami offered his condolences to the families of the victims, and the mayor of Tehran sent his expression of sympathy to the mayor of New York shortly after the attacks. Iranian officials signed the book of condolences opened at the Swiss Embassy, which oversees U.S. interests in Iran. Students held apparently spontaneous demonstrations and chanted pro-American slogans, in contrast to the standard, orchestrated "Down with the U.S." Several Iranian parliamentarians, including the head of the reformist Second of Khordad Party, Behzad Nabavi, called for normal relations with all countries except Israel. He previously had expressed strong anti-American sentiments.

Probably most striking was the Iranian response to an American letter of October 7, which assured Tehran that the United States would respect Iranian airspace and territorial integrity and asked for assistance for any U.S. military personnel forced to land on Iranian territory or who escaped to Iranian soil. Iran agreed to assist American pilots downed on Iranian soil and to allow transshipment of food and humanitarian supplies for Afghan refugees in northwestern Afghanistan. (Humanitarian cooperation had actually begun in late summer 2001 under United Nations [UN] aegis.) During his visit to New York for the opening of the UN General Assembly in

October, Khatami condemned Osama bin Laden and his supporters as extremists and terrorists, a "cult of fanatics who...could only communicate with perceived opponents through carnage and destruction." He said that there were no barriers to cultural or economic ties with the United States and, in an interview with *The New York Times*, hinted that Iran could accept whatever settlement Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians agreed upon. If all Palestinians accept Israel's right to exist, he told the interviewer, then "we

clearly, Iranians in the public and private sectors are debating whether there should be an opening to America

will respect the wishes of the Palestinian nation." Khatami and former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani had made this type of comment before, and the formulation is similar to one made in the 1980s by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and deemed acceptable in Western eyes.

Three final events have drawn attention to potential Iran-U.S. connections. Iran's representative to the United Nations, Mohammed Hadi Nejad-Hosseini, met in October with several senators and representatives, including staunch supporters of Israel, raising speculation that Tehran may be ready to extend U.S. officials an invitation to visit Iran. Iran's Foreign Minister Kemal Kharazi made a special point of shaking Secretary of State Colin Powell's hand before a meeting of the UN 6+2 Committee on Afghanistan. Most recently, Mohsen Rezai—a leading conservative, former head of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and currently secretary general of the Expediency Council—acknowledged that the two countries shared a common interest in Afghanistan. According to *The New York Times*, Rezai further suggested that better relations might be possible if the United States were to take the first step.¹

. . . Or Deliberate Ambiguity?

How much should we read into these signals, if that is what they are? Clearly, Iranians in the public and private sectors are debating whether there should be an opening to America. Some scholars and analysts believe that the reformists and conservatives are deeply divided over this issue, while others, including Iranian experts, claim that even the conservatives favor normalizing relations with the United States. They just do not want Khatami and the reformists to get the credit. Indeed, Khamenei's strategy might be to slow down what even he may acknowledge to be an inevitable process—the normalization of relations with Washington.

Nevertheless, Iranian politics—and therefore decisions on foreign policy gestures or moves—are in virtual gridlock. For every effort Khatami has made to loosen the restrictions on social and cultural life and personal freedoms, or advance a more progressive foreign policy since his first election in 1997, his conservative critics—those labeled hard-liners outside Iran—have countered by closing reformist newspapers; arresting Khatami supporters, including the mayor of Tehran and a parliamentarian who denounced the conservative-dominated judiciary as undemocratic; and calling for opposing U.S. initiatives in Afghanistan and Central Asia. While Khatami and reformist politicians were talking of condolences and the celebration of the "dialogue of civilizations" at the United Nations this year, Supreme Leader Khamenei continued to reject firmly and clearly the idea of dialogue with the United States. On October 12, for instance, he accused America of "dragging the planet into global war" and hinted that those who even suggest dialogue should be removed from their posts. He warned that "any negotiation with America is against the nation's interest." The judiciary even set up a body to ensure that no Iranian official pursues relations with the United States.

In contrast, Khatami's remarks while in New York in October were more nuanced and balanced, at least in style. In his UN speech, he called for an end to the bombing campaign in Afghanistan as soon as possible and urged that the United Nations—and not the United States—determine the post-Taliban government. Yet, lest anyone think that Khatami was suggesting a softer policy on the Middle East

Judith S. Yaphe is a senior research fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Please direct any questions or comments to Dr. Yaphe at (202) 685-2224 or forward them via e-mail to yaphej@ndu.edu.

peace process, he repeated official criticism of Israel, which he said was “founded on terror and killings.” He called for recognition of the rights of Palestinians, including the right of all refugees to return to their land, the creation of a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem, and the right of all the people of Palestine—Muslim, Christian, and Jew—to decide their own future.

The seemingly softer statements of Khatami and Rafsanjani notwithstanding, Iranian actions display more continuity than change. Tehran has not changed its basic policies on opposing the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf or Central Asia or on Israel and the peace process. Abdullah Nuri, a prominent pro-Khatami supporter, was jailed for, among other things, questioning Iran’s continued hostility to Israel. If Khatami’s rhetoric on Israel has seemed more accommodating than Khamenei’s, elements under his command have pursued and continue to pursue a policy much more consistent with Khamenei’s pronouncements. In particular, Iran is directly and materially supporting Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both of which claim responsibility for the spate of suicide bombings in Israel over the past several months. That such attacks—including the attack on teenagers at a pizzeria in Tel Aviv—are clearly terrorism and not resistance to enemy occupation as the propaganda portrays could make it difficult for Tehran or Washington to reach common ground on either issue. As if to underscore this point, in early January, Israel captured a boat carrying arms to the Palestinian Authority that were allegedly supplied by Iran and its Lebanese surrogate, the militant wing of Hizballah. Details are sketchy, but the shipment could have been arranged by Iranian militant elements determined to embarrass Khatami in the eyes of the United States.²

Influences on Iranian Decisionmaking

In thinking about the gridlock that characterizes the Iranian decisionmaking process, we must keep in mind several factors that decisively influence Tehran’s view of its role in world affairs and the threat that it faces:

Nationalism is reemerging as a defining element in the Islamic Republic. The era of revolutionary Islam as the driving force in the Republic is over. It ended with Iran’s acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598,

which ended the war with Iraq; the creation of the Council of Expediency to determine whether laws were in accordance with Islam and to rule over Islamic law to preserve the state; and the revision of the constitution to allow Khamenei—not a Grand Ayatollah—to succeed Khomeini. As noted above, power has become more centered in the hands of the Supreme Leader and president since 1989. The emphasis on the religious and revolutionary definition of Iranian actions and policies has shifted to a somewhat less aggressive, more nationalist version of Iranian governance and policy. National interest shapes foreign and domestic policies, although few Iranians seriously propose dismantling the rule of the clerics—*vilayat-e faqih*—entirely. Khatami represents a transition phase as Iranians attempt to

conservative clerics continue to trump Khatami’s efforts to appoint a more liberal government or to pursue reform

resolve the dilemma of how to effect change in the system without changing systems.

Iran’s leaders agree broadly on how best to defend the country’s national interests, territorial integrity, security, and international influence. The consensus includes Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Khatami, Expediency Council head Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and other senior officials. Substantively, it spans Khatami’s call in 1997 for a dialogue of civilizations between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds, who and what should determine Afghanistan’s future after the Taliban, opposition to Israel and the peace process and support for Palestinian aspirations, and even the conciliatory gestures made toward America since September 11. It also probably extends to decisions regarding Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capability and acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, though that consensus is cloaked in ambiguity. As we have seen in the past, Iran’s clerical leaders prefer a posture of calculated ambiguity, whereas the United States prefers contacts that are clear and transparent.

Political gridlock in Tehran reveals the weakness of President Khatami and the determination of conservatives not to make

concessions to reformists. Conservative clerics—with their hold on the judiciary, military, and security services—continue to trump Khatami’s efforts to appoint a more liberal government or to pursue reform with arrests of reformists, especially those who support Khatami, newspaper closures, and public floggings. Khatami’s inability or unwillingness to push for reforms alienates many supporters, but it is not clear that a disaffected electorate would be prepared to challenge the regime. Many Iranians are war-weary and fearful of another revolutionary upheaval that would be unlikely to resolve their opposition to any government strictures.

Iranians genuinely fear encirclement by the United States. Iran’s leaders—whether reformist or conservative, Persian nationalist or Islamic extremist—view the world with trepidation. They see their country as encircled by real and potential enemies: Iraq, which used chemical weapons against Tehran in the 8-year war; the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, which host the U.S. military presence and deny their Shia communities full rights; Pakistan, which is occasionally involved in hostile skirmishes with Iran on their mutual border and has encouraged anti-Iranian activity in Afghanistan; and the Central Asian republics, once pro-Soviet, now a source of economic opportunity, sectarian risk, and U.S. bases. Above all, the United States and Israel are viewed as enemies, with Washington seen as keen to place pro-American regimes in Baghdad and Kabul and to militarize Central Asia, while Israel is a nuclear-armed power determined to control Muslim holy places. They especially resent being kept on the Department of State list of state sponsors of terrorism and worry that some influential Americans want regime change in Iran instead of improved relations. Regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum, these leaders share a common view of the threats to Iranian security and of the kinds of measures necessary to protect Iran.

Self-sufficiency shapes Iran’s strategic and military thinking. Many Iranians, including some among the Revolutionary Guard, assume that eventually they will have to fight Iraq again and alone—just as they did from 1980 to 1988—and that Iran must be able to defend itself. To meet challenges to its security, Iran’s leaders believe that the country must be independent and self-sufficient in strategic and tactical terms; must reassert Iran’s traditional role of regional hegemon in the Gulf and

beyond; and must have an enhanced capability to defend against any threat of military aggression. To achieve this degree of capability and self-sufficiency, Iran must build its own military industries, reconstitute a modern military force, and rely minimally on foreign suppliers. This includes acquiring nuclear weapons to compensate for military weakness and relative strategic isolation. If Iraq or Israel has nuclear, biological, or chemical (NBC) capabilities, then so must Iran. Tehran also probably views nuclear weapon systems as the only way to reach strategic parity with Israel or the United States, a balance that it could not achieve through a conventional arms buildup.³

Based on the foregoing analysis, we should be careful not to overplay the theme of gridlock in explaining Iranian foreign policy behavior, as if some kind of resolution to the reformist-conservative struggle would suddenly transform the country's attitudes toward the world beyond its borders. In fact, this analysis would argue that the contrary is true: that on many strategic issues, what is often portrayed as gridlock more nearly approximates a consensus shared by opposing camps—and not a dispute between them.

This is not to deny the possibility of debates over foreign policy within the country. Many Iranians might be asking questions such as the following: What price has been paid for supporting Palestinian extremist organizations, such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad? What has Iran gained from its long involvement in Lebanon? How close can Tehran get to the Arab autocrats of the Persian (or is it Arabian?) Gulf without diminishing its ties to and credibility with the regional Shiah communities? What does Iran risk by sponsoring Islamic activism in Central Asia? Could it cost Iran Russian assistance in building new weapon programs and acquiring advanced technology? Iran surely is not immune to the problem of having to resolve potentially conflicting priorities but certainly would attempt to do so within the scope of its core concerns.

Charting a Way Ahead

U.S. policy toward Iran sets the bar for normalization well above any level that Tehran is likely to meet in the near future. America insists that Iran end its involvement in international terrorism, forswear opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and cease trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Under

this formulation, Iran would have to cut all ties to Lebanon's Hizballah, an organization that it helped to create, as well as Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and other global Islamist groups determined to use violence to realize their political ambitions.⁴ Iran's senior leaders may have stopped targeting U.S. personnel and facilities directly in recent years, but American efforts to persuade Iran not to support militants opposed to the Arab-Israeli peace process and not to pursue a nuclear weapons program have had no discernible effect. A change in Iranian leadership is unlikely to change these policies or end suspicions of American behavior. Nor is it clear that if Iran took some of these steps, the United States

sanctions have delayed but not denied Iran the ability to acquire unconventional weapon capabilities

would agree to begin the process of normalization. Certainly, Tehran would not venture down this path without *clear* indications of recognition and corresponding actions by Washington.

Several policy options might influence Iran as the debate progresses in Iran and America. These options are not mutually exclusive.

Option 1: Reshape containment. U.S. containment policy placed sanctions on Iran that include embargoes on trade and military procurement and penalties for those providing investment and development assistance to Iran. Scholars and policy analysts disagree on the impact of sanctions, but one thing is clear: sanctions, including the arms embargo and efforts to block foreign loans to and investment in Iran, have delayed but not denied Iran the ability to acquire unconventional weapon capabilities, expertise, and technology. In fact, low oil prices and domestic economic woes probably did more damage to the Iranian economy than did U.S.-imposed sanctions. Moreover, demands for domestic spending on subsidies, job creation, and economic infrastructure in years of low oil prices did not preclude spending on NBC technology.

Recommendation: Maintain military sanctions, drop economic sanctions. Encourage foreign investment in Iran's domestic and economic infrastructure. Special attention will

have to be given to defining appropriate dual-use technology. Acquiescence to a pipeline project to carry Central Asian energy resources would be an important signal of American awareness of Iran's economic needs. It also could reduce or avoid Iranian dependence on Chinese investment in the energy sector of its economy. Conversely, broadening the dialogue on Iran with Europe beyond NBC weapons and missile issues could help create conditions for eventually moving beyond the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which was renewed by Congress for 5 years in summer 2001.

Option 2: Promote greater transparency. Iranian leaders, for the most part, assume that the United States maintains a large military force in the Gulf to monitor Iran, not Iraq. They also assume that America is intent upon militarizing relations with Central Asia (where our military-to-military contacts with the new republics of the former Soviet Union are highly visible). To prevent Iran from misinterpreting U.S. intentions and activities, especially in the Persian Gulf, American military activities should be as transparent as possible, consistent with the requirement for operational security.

Recommendation: Employ confidence-building measures, such as help in maritime mine clearance, an incidents-at-sea agreement, and joint rescue exercises; the gradual inclusion of Iran in regional security discussions; and greater transparency in U.S. military operations in the Persian Gulf/Central Asian region. Apply the success of the 6+2 Afghan security group to other regional security issues involving Iranian and American interests. This would not amount to a security pact or Iran's inclusion in an arrangement similar to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); instead, it could mean a new venue where tensions might be reduced without risk of military confrontation. The more predictable and transparent the United States is in its military posture in the Gulf and the more continuity in policy before and after Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, the less value there will be to Iran in acquiring nuclear weapons.

Option 3: Leverage NBC suppliers. If preventing the proliferation of NBC weapons is a top policy priority, then U.S. policy should look for ways to prevent or discourage suppliers from making material and training available to Iran. This, of course, raises the difficult question of what price America may be prepared to

pay to convince Russia, China, and North Korea not to continue aiding Iran. For example, is a closer relationship with NATO or reassurances regarding American development of missile defenses more important for Russia than selling nuclear technology and expertise to Iran? Would China respond to expanded access to markets or technology? Can North Korea afford to forego profits from missile sales to Iran and other Middle Eastern countries that are looking to upgrade weapons capabilities? There is no evidence to suggest that leveraging suppliers halts proliferators. There is, however, the distinct danger that we will pay in influence or treasure and that the suppliers will continue to provide the proscribed goods and services.

Recommendation: Maintain strong counterproliferation policy. Make clear to our partners in the war against global terrorism that support for the war does not excuse weapon proliferation or assistance to Iran in building NBC or long-range missile capabilities.

Option 4: Provide additional military aid or other security guarantees to the Gulf Arab governments to deter capricious behavior by Iran. A U.S. military presence in the Gulf will be required for some time. The desire to reduce force vulnerability needs to be balanced against the political and deterrent value of a visible American military presence in the Gulf. Pulling back U.S. forces as Iran becomes a much stronger regional power would add to the incentives for proliferation by suggesting that the United States will reduce its presence in response to governments acquiring nuclear weapons capability; maintaining a determined presence would demonstrate to Iran that the United States takes its security commitments seriously and signal to the Gulf States that their security is not the price of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and its partners in the GCC are consumers of security, vulnerable to attack from larger, more powerful neighbors. The memory of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait should be sufficient reminder that threatening neighbors cannot be ignored. Memories fade fast in this region, however, and most Arabs have an overwhelming desire to return to the policies of a simpler, distant era—before Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait and before an Islamic Iran sought to remake the Gulf in its image. This complacency probably will not change if and when Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. Furthermore, the Arab Gulf governments are aware that their security ties to the United States allow them greater flexibil-

ity in their own budding relations with Iran. To be sure, they are not likely to support a policy of preemptive strikes to lessen their problem with Iran. On the other hand, even as their ties to Iran expand, they will not join Iran in a security arrangement that would preclude a U.S. presence in the Gulf.

Recommendation: Be prepared to offer expanded security guarantees and, if necessary, a smaller presence. How we identify the regional security threat—an NBC-armed Iraq, a resurgent and nuclear Iran, regionally based international terrorists—will determine the size and shape of our presence through the

U.S. policy could also aim at renewing dialogue with Iran while at the same time seeking to minimize the value of Iran's acquiring unconventional weapons

next decade. An international agreement to assure international access to the Strait of Hormuz might ease American concerns about Iranian plans to close the strait to international shipping, though the negotiability and impact of a measure would need close study.

Option 5: Promote limited dialogue. As an adjunct to a reshaped containment posture, U.S. policy could also aim at renewing dialogue with Iran while at the same time seeking to minimize the value of Iran's acquiring unconventional weapons. U.S. sanctions policy has inhibited some countries and companies from doing business in and providing loans to Iran, but our ability to dictate the terms of engagement of other governments with Iran is diminishing rapidly. A new course of seeking greater, albeit limited, contact with Iran would seem more productive than trying unilaterally to sustain the current containment.

Recommendation: Tone down rhetorical references to Iran as a rogue state. Acknowledging Iran's strategic weight and threat perceptions and giving it a voice in a new regional forum (not the GCC) would allow Iran the political, economic, and strategic interaction that it seeks, while also serving to underscore Iraq's continued isolation. It also would set the agenda and terms of engagement on the basis of Iran's behavior before it tries to make demands based on a nuclear status. The

United States might also work on limited topics of shared concern, support Iran for membership in the World Trade Organization, and expand Track II-type measures to include contacts with lower-level Iranian civil servants, intellectuals, students, and academicians. Afghanistan's future after the Taliban is clearly another such issue. Baghdad will perceive that it is the target of a new Iranian-U.S. rapprochement. This could work to Iranian and American advantage. America cannot choose which Iranians with whom it will deal. We cannot identify the good versus the bad or the democratically elected versus the undemocratically selected leaders of Iran. That is Iran's business, not ours. What is important is that the contacts be clear and unambiguous and not brokered by mysterious middlemen with their own agendas.

Conclusions

Iran has always raised hard choices for the United States, and more so than ever since September 11. Clearly, the attacks have created an opportunity to engage some governments with whom the United States has long been at odds. By the same token, they raise the risk to U.S. policy of Faustian bargains with newfound friends that could be inconsistent with other, longer-term U.S. policy interests and objectives. Should cooperation in the war on global terrorism override objections to a regime's lack of democratic standards, suppression of dissent and human rights, or repression of minority groups? Granted, Iran is not in the same category as Russia, Uzbekistan, or China (that is, a putative U.S. partner that does not support international terrorism but is burdened by a history of questionable human rights practices and suppression of religious and political minorities). Iran is different: once a friend, it is now an adversary, stained by a history of supporting international terrorism. Moreover, indicators of popular unrest—including student demonstrations comparing the mullahs to the Taliban—suggest that the regime is stifling popular yearnings for political change so strong that they are not being suppressed by arrests, trials, public floggings, or warnings from the Supreme Leader and the president. Would an American policy that publicly encouraged or offered moral support to the government in Tehran gain the United States any leverage in dealing with a regime still capable of significant internal repression? Should the war on global terrorism supercede U.S. policies

opposing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?

These are choices for U.S. policymakers in pursuit of Al Qaeda and its support networks. They are factors that the United States needs to consider as it weighs the merits of seeking normalization of relations with Iran, which is, after all, an imperfect democracy with a religiously based legal and political system. Once our staunch friend, it has been our greatest enemy in the region. Above all, it shares with the United States certain common interests and enemies—including Iraq and some forms of Islamic extremism, such as were exemplified by the Taliban in Afghanistan—that could provide a bridge to greater regional security.

Notes

¹ Amy Waldman, *The New York Times*, December 10, 2001, A10.

² Most Iranian shipments to supply Hizballah—the conduit for aid to Palestinian factions opposed to the peace process—are delivered by air through Damascus.

³ Iran began its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, in particular a nuclear capability, under the Shah in the 1970s, at roughly the same time that Iraq embarked on its NBC acquisition efforts. Iran's acquisitions include Russian- and North Korean-designed Scud missiles, as well as chemical and biological weapons. Russia is building at least one and possibly as many as three nuclear power plants at Bushehr and is providing nuclear training and technology to Iranian scientists. Iran's newest missile—the Shahab-3—has a range of 1,200 kilometers, putting targets in Turkey, Israel, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf within its reach. See Kori N. Schake and Judith S. Yaphe, *The Strategic Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2001).

⁴ Key elements here are alleged Iranian support for the Khobar Towers terrorists, who may have fled to Iran after that operation in 1996, and the safe haven Iran accorded the Lebanese Hizballah terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyah and his cohorts, who orchestrated U.S. and Kuwaiti airplane hijackings and U.S. and European hostage takings in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Other recent titles in the Strategic Forum series

John F. Reichart

Adversary Use of NBC Weapons: A Neglected Challenge

(No. 187, December 2001)



Joseph McMillan

U.S.-Saudi Relations: Rebuilding the Strategic Consensus

(No. 186, November 2001)

Michael E. Marti

China: Making the Case for Realistic Engagement

(No. 185, September 2001)

Kori N. Schake

Do European Union Defense Initiatives Threaten NATO?

(No. 184, August 2001)

M. Elaine Bunn, David E. Mosher, and
Richard D. Sokolsky

Regional Conflicts with Strategic Consequences

(No. 183, July 2001)

John C. Holzman

A Golden Opportunity: The Next Steps in U.S.-Indian Relations

(No. 182, July 2001)

Anthony C. Zinni

A Military for the 21st Century: Lessons from the Recent Past

(No. 181, July 2001)

Eugene B. Rumer and
Richard D. Sokolsky

Normalizing U.S.-Russian Relations

(No. 180, April 2001)

Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler

Revising the Two-Major Theater War Standard

(No. 179, April 2001)

Richard D. Sokolsky

Renovating U.S. Strategic Arms Control Policy

(No. 178, February 2001)

M. Elaine Bunn and Richard D. Sokolsky

The U.S. Strategic Posture Review: Issues for the New Administration

(No. 177, February 2001)

For on-line access to **Strategic Forum**, go to:
<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/h6.html>

The Institute for National Strategic Studies publishes books, monographs, and reports on national security strategy, defense policy, and national military strategy. For information on NDU Press visit the Web site at: <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/press/ndup2.html>. INSS also produces *Joint Force Quarterly* for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the journal can be accessed at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/index.htm.

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Stephen J. Flanagan
Director

James A. Schear
Director of Research



The Strategic Forum series presents original research by members of the National Defense University as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from this country and abroad. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

PUBLICATION DIRECTORATE

Robert A. Silano
Director of Publications

William R. Bode
General Editor