

Praise for *Negotiating with Iran* *Wrestling the Ghosts of History*

“Negotiating with Iran should be read not just by foreign service officials but also by academics and general readers interested in U.S.-Iran relations.”

—**Ervand Abrahamian**, Baruch College, CUNY

“This is an excellent book and an important contribution to what is rapidly becoming the central issue in American foreign policy. Limbert draws on years of professional and personal experience to explore and explain the problematic nature of Iran-U.S. relations and to offer coherent and constructive solutions for the future. Limbert is in the enviable position of being able to combine the perspective of a historian with the immediacy of a diplomat who has been at the forefront of America’s tragic relationship with Iran, to provide a penetrating yet accessible account of the relationship. This book should be essential reading for students and practitioners alike.”

—**Ali M. Ansari**, University of St. Andrews

“Drawing on his personal observations, interviews with key players, and the historical record, John Limbert has written a thought-provoking study on the experience of negotiating with Iran in the recent past and the lessons the past provides for negotiating with Iran today. This carefully documented essay is both handbook and history—a must-read for both government officials who intend to sit at the negotiating table with Iran and all those interested in the tangled record of Iran relations with the West and Russia.”

—**Shaul Bakhash**, George Mason University

“A must-read for anyone who hopes for (or fears) an American reengagement with Iran. Superb diplomatic history focused on lessons learned rather than festering grievances. I hope Iranians read this as well as Americans. Limbert is one of our few genuine Iran experts.”

—**Richard W. Bulliet**, Columbia University

“Well conceived and organized, a major addition to the study of contemporary Iran, this book is compelling reading and is comprehensive in its historical and political reach. The author provides a welcome resource as the United States and other countries begin to consider expanded discussions with the Iranian leadership.”

—**Nicholas Burns**, Harvard University

“Written by an author intimately familiar with the Persian language, history, and customs, this unique work addresses and sets aside many false but widespread preconceptions about Iran, Iranians, and Iranian culture. A useful addition to the literature on Iranian negotiating technique, style, and expectations, and a stand-alone book on the subject, this study is very timely. Iran has emerged as a regional power; on many crucial issues the United States and Iran are at loggerheads; and the new American administration intends to launch direct engagement with Iran. For Americans, understanding Iranian negotiating behavior is clearly critical at this juncture.”

—**Haleh Esfandiari**, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

“John Limbert writes with empathy and honesty about the contentious relationship between Iran and America. He offers deep insights into Iran’s complexities and contradictions, and into the shortsightedness and occasional lapses of strategic sense on the part of American policymakers. In the end, he wants to help heal the wounds between Tehran and Washington, and his book is full of wisdom, practical advice, and gentle humor about the former allies, current adversaries.”

—**Ellen Laipson**, The Henry L. Stimson Center

“An exceptional work and a must-read for anyone working on U.S.-Iran relations. Thoughtful, honest, accessible, and intelligent, John Limbert has provided us with a tremendous service. Not only will this work become the seminal text on Iranian negotiating behavior, but I think this is one of the most important works published on Iran over the last three decades.”

—**Karim Sadjadpour**, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Negotiating with Iran

NEGOTIATING WITH IRAN

Wrestling the Ghosts of History

JOHN W. LIMBERT



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UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

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*To Parvaneh, my beloved wife and companion of forty-three years.
She has taught me many lessons in the art of negotiation.*

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Foreword

Thirty years ago, after a group of zealous Islamist students invaded the U.S. embassy in Tehran for a “set-in,” the nations of Iran and the United States came to an impasse. Seeing opportunity in the confusion, powerful mullahs turned the planned demonstration into a fulcrum, from which they leveraged revolutionary Iran into an Islamist theocracy. America found itself powerless to rescue the fifty-two captive members of its diplomatic mission, and equally incapable of bargaining for their release. The students who would hold the Americans hostage for more than a year were, in a sense, captives themselves.

One of the chief ironies of the crisis was this: If there was one person in the world ideally suited to steer both sides out of the mess, it was John Limbert. Unfortunately, the students had tied him to a chair.

Here was the best American friend Iran had. Limbert was that rare American who understood and loved the ancient near-Eastern nation. He had first visited as a college student almost two decades earlier, and had returned as a Peace Corps volunteer. In those years he met and married his Iranian wife, Parvaneh. Their children were natives of both countries. Limbert had a doctorate in history from Harvard University, was fluent in Farsi, had taught in Iranian universities, and in the months prior to being taken hostage, had been second secretary in the embassy’s political section. Few Americans knew as much or cared as much about Iran’s long, rich history and culture as he did, and no one better understood the violent currents of change buffeting that country in 1979.

Each of the captive Americans responded differently to captivity. Some became meditative and found solace in religion. Some tried to escape. Some became depressed. Embassy political officer Michael Metrisko, who also spoke fluent Farsi, responded with anger. He fought back with unrelenting fury, right up until the day of his release, when he picked a fight with guards on the bus to the Tehran airport. Limbert’s response was the opposite. Locked in various basement rooms for months on end, he clung to his role as diplomat. He gently reasoned with his captors. He listened to them and patiently corrected their grammar—in English and Farsi—and their understanding of history—American and Iranian. He looked unceasingly for common ground.

His captivity perfectly encapsulated the students' dilemma. Without diplomats, there was no way to engage in serious dialogue. In striking a symbolic blow against the United States, the students had, in effect, burned the only bridge between our nations. It has been down ever since.

As I write this in 2009, Iran and the United States are still eyeing each other warily across an abyss. The ruling mullahs' pursuit of a nuclear arsenal and President Obama's determination to stop them is just the latest twist in an ongoing saga of discord. Much of the anger and distrust that separates us is valid, but much is also rooted in misunderstanding. Iranian true-believers see the United States as The Great Satan, a "world-devouring," godless force bent on dismantling Islam and reducing their country to its former vassal status. Patriotic Americans see Iran as champion of the great backward movement of the twenty-first century, a powerful enemy of liberal western values, a sponsor of terror attacks, and increasingly as a direct mortal threat to Israel.

Getting past these competing caricatures, both of which have elements of truth, will require skilled diplomacy. Obama has been criticized in this country just for being willing to try, and it remains to be seen if Iran will meet him halfway. If and when a formal dialogue resumes, sorting our way back to mutuality won't be easy. Many of the differences between Iran and America are fundamental, and the stakes are high on both sides.

In *Negotiating with Iran*, Limbert decries the "downward spiral" that has defined U.S.-Iran relations for a half-century. "Each side sees every move of the other in the worst light possible, and responds accordingly," he writes. "That view—assuming the worst about the other—has also driven both Iranians and Americans to acts that create self-fulfilling prophesies. Assumptions about hostility create more hostility. . . . Hostile intent is assumed, and both sides find the evidence to fit their assumptions."

America is not a nineteenth-century-style imperial power bent on colonizing smaller nations, and Iran is not a theocratic monolith. It is a nation with a surprisingly vibrant political life. The things an American president says about Iran have tremendous impact within that country. When President Bush referred to Iran as part of the "axis of evil," he played into the hands of hard-liners who rely on fear of America for domestic popularity. Obama's approach could deflate the appeal of the aging religious regime and boost reformers in Iran who may be capable of edging their country away from religious zealotry and international confrontation.

Limbert examines Iran's major collisions with the western world in modern times, taking us beyond the evil caricatures. He notes the "mental

traps” that prevent successful negotiation, such as simplistic, xenophobic assumptions about “national character,” and warns his American colleagues, “such labeling and mental shortcuts...guarantee the failure of negotiations by eliminating nuance, hard questions, and exploration of what may lie behind the apparently inexplicable actions of Iranians.” He provides a nuanced understanding of the struggle for Iranian independence after World War II, and shows that U.S. involvement in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953, while deplorable, was not as straightforwardly imperial as the official Iranian version would have it. Simplistic and often propagandistic accounts of modern history blind us to mutual self-interest. *Negotiating With Iran* maps an escape from the downward spiral.

Despite being one of the primary victims of Iran’s assault on international civility, Limbert has long advocated renewed dialogue. Anyone making this argument has encountered the sentiment that negotiation, in itself, amounts to capitulation. Why waste time talking to a regime that, in one of its founding acts, so famously repudiated diplomacy?

This question has an easy answer. Merely talking to Iran, or to any enemy for that matter, has no downside, particularly in an age where appearances frequently count for more than reality. Opening a dialogue doesn’t mean capitulation or even significant concession. Success would back both nations away from economic or military confrontation, something any sensible person would desire. And even if we fail utterly to dissuade the mullahs from building atomic weapons, which we may, making the effort affords us significant international leverage, which we will need if further sanctions or force become necessary. Just by trying to resolve the standoff peacefully, the United States steps away from the image created by Tehran’s propagandists. Iran, on the other hand, becomes less a hero of the Islamist cause than a dangerous and warlike state putting its own ambitions before the larger interests of mankind.

Can a government that sees itself as divinely inspired compromise on anything? Given Iran’s historical slipperiness and fanaticism, the old rug-merchant stereotype, aren’t we setting ourselves up to be taken?

As Limbert makes clear, Americans are just as capable of clever, tough bargaining as Iranians. Understanding the country’s history and politics is a critical step in that direction, as is a deep appreciation for what skillful negotiation can accomplish.