6

The Lessons

Fourteen Steps to Success

At some point, somebody's got to trust somebody.
—Attributed to Alcibiades (450–404 BCE)
From Steven Pressfield, *Tides of War*

What has history taught us about negotiating with Iranians? The encounters described in these case studies were not all brilliant successes even though many of those involved were intelligent, perceptive, and well-meaning people. All acted out of a very human mix of patriotism, idealism, ambition, opportunism, religious faith, humanitarianism, and cynicism.

Beyond the question of praiseworthy or selfish motives, the history related in these accounts is, for the most part, an uninspiring one. It contains many more don'ts than dos. Too often there is a pattern of leaders acting on impulse, of setting aside their own and others' better judgment, of believing the other side to be stupid, of ignoring long- and short-term consequences, and of not seeing how others will perceive an action or a statement. On the Iranian side, there is distortion of history to suit ideology and the ambitions of those in power; on the American side there is ignorance of history and the belief that somehow Iranian perceptions of the past do not matter.

There are lessons to be learned even from what is often a history of failure. In these cases, negotiators sometimes made judicious decisions that brought agreements beneficial to both sides; more often, however, they did the opposite and made decisions that led to breakdown and to terrible consequences in the long term. American negotiators who in the future are going to deal with Iranian counterparts should consider carefully the successes and failures of their predecessors. They should ask themselves, for example, "Why

did United Nations envoy Picco succeed in freeing the Lebanon hostages in 1991 when White House staffer Oliver North had failed in 1985–86?" Those future American negotiators may find themselves dealing with Iranians in many settings. They may be negotiating face-to-face, sitting at a table with other parties, or exchanging messages through intermediaries (as Warren Christopher did through the Germans and Algerians in 1980–81). Their negotiations may be government-to-government, semi-official (track-two), or commercial. In all these contexts, the lessons of history remain valid.

Fourteen Steps to Success

From these events, from negotiators' earlier successes and failures, I have distilled fourteen suggestions for steps that will raise the chances of success in negotiating with Iranians. Some of these steps require nothing more than applying the basic negotiation techniques taught in dozens of courses and workshops and will work in dealings with representatives of any state counterpart, not just the Islamic Republic. Iran, however, remains a special case, and the American negotiator needs both to apply the basics and then go well beyond them. The persistent, deep, and mutual mistrust that has existed between the two countries since 1979 has meant that negotiators, their judgment too often clouded by real or imagined grievances, have ignored the fundamentals of their craft and have failed to find objective criteria, calculate Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement, and, most important, separate the person from the problem.[1]

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that, in the case of Iran, there are almost no recent positive experiences or store of goodwill that negotiators can use to overcome difficulties of process or substance. Relationships always matter in negotiations, and, in the Iranian-American case, they barely exist. Since the two countries formally broke diplomatic relations in 1980, there has been an almost complete lack of official, bilateral contact. That estrangement has left the field mostly to wheeler-dealers, professional pundits, and self-appointed intermediaries who are often pursuing personal or political agendas. Lacking firsthand knowledge and serious analysis, we are often left with distorted

1. The last principle has been particularly difficult. In the spring of 2007, when Admiral Fallon, the chief of the United States Central Command, asked President Bush about U.S. strategy on Iran, the response was, "These are assholes." Woodward, *The War Within*, 334. Such an opinion is hardly a strategy. The Republican presidential candidate John McCain, in his September 26, 2008, televised debate with Barack Obama, continued the tradition. He rhetorically asked his rival, "How can you sit down with President Ahmadinezhad when he has called for wiping Israel off the map?"

stereotypes about Iranians' basic irrationalism and egoism and with sweeping, questionable assertions such as "Iranians hate negotiations."[2]

Given the burdens of the past, Iranians and Americans who enter negotiations today have a difficult assignment. The setting for their negotiations is unpromising, and the chances of success are uncertain. Even negotiators with infinite patience, the best techniques, the most profound understanding of their craft, and the deepest knowledge of what motivates the other side have no guarantees of success. Yet if there are mutual interests, and if both sides see a benefit in coming to the table—as they did see in 2001–02 about Afghanistan and as they should see today about Iraq—then the suggestions listed below may just help future negotiators and raise their chances of a productive encounter from none to at least slim.

1. Establish objective criteria free of legalisms.

Closely reasoned legal arguments may have their place in a negotiation, but for the most part they will not impress the Iranian side. This feature of Iranian negotiating style long predates the Islamic Republic. In February 1946, for example, Iranian Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam, meeting with Stalin on the sensitive issue of Soviet forces remaining on Iranian soil after World War II in violation of international agreements, deliberately avoided arguing the legalisms of the tripartite treaty of 1942 or the 1921 Soviet-Iranian friendship treaty, which gave the USSR the right to intervene in Iran under certain conditions. Instead, knowing he was holding a very weak hand, Qavam referred to Soviet withdrawal as a matter of equity and friendship between the two countries.[3]

The Islamic Republic has had a contentious relationship with the law and legal issues. In its earliest years, the new, revolutionary authorities took drastic steps to eradicate the European-based legal system it had inherited from the Pahlavi era (1925–79) and attempted to replace it with practices the new rulers believed were in accordance with Shia religious law. The new regime also undertook a wholesale purge of judges, lawyers, and prosecutors—especially women—and replaced them with clerics who were sup-

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2. See chapter 7 for one observer's comment about Iranians' preoccupation with self." See also David Ignatius, "Countering Iran's Distrust," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2007, B7. The reality is that just about every interaction in Iran—from buying sugar to obtaining a driver's license—involves negotiation. In the documentary "Divorce Iranian Style" (Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 1998), for example, we watch Iranian women negotiate a maze of bureaucracy, family, and religious rules to escape intolerable family situations.

3. See chapter 2.

posed to establish an Islamic and revolutionary legal system. The regime also sacked many members of Iran's diplomatic service, who traditionally had brought strong legal credentials to their work.

In such a setting, it will be vital—although sometimes difficult—for negotiators to establish what experts call mutually acceptable objective criteria in an exchange. The Islamic Republic, particularly in its most revolutionary and ideological moments, has often regarded what others call international law as a pretext for foreigners to cheat Iranians out of their rights. One expert, writing of "the historical distrust Iranians had for Western legalism," asks rhetorically, "Had treaty after treaty not proved that international law was simply a political device to ensure Western control?"[4] For Iranian negotiators, the test of an agreement, therefore, is not whether it conforms to the experts' notions of legality but whether it can be presented as a victory for Islam and for Iran. Such criteria, of course, are subjective and ambiguous, and in a highly charged political arena, what one group claims as victory another will call betrayal.

The American negotiator, therefore, should look for unambiguous, mutually agreeable standards that avoid legal jargon and technicalities. Legal arguments will often carry less weight with Iranians than with Americans. For the American side in a transaction, maintaining the integrity of the process—grounded on legal principles—is often crucial. For the Iranian side, that process is seen only as a means (or an obstacle) to achieving an all-important result. An Iranian visa applicant, for example, will probably have little interest in upholding the integrity of American immigration law. He or she will show genuine confusion if a visa officer protests indignantly ("You lied to me!") on discovering that the applicant misrepresented certain facts in the belief he needed to do so to obtain the visa.

There is an important distinction here. A lack of interest in points of law may suggest that the Iranian side is taking an emotional, subjective view of an issue while ignoring logic and objective factors. The reality is not so simple. The emotional factors may be important, but the true motives of the Iranian side in a negotiation will sometimes be difficult to comprehend. Those motives may be a mixture of the political, personal, financial, and ideological. The American negotiator, lacking clear insight into these motivations, should be wary of taking refuge in the oversimplified and time-honored view of Iranians as emotional and incomprehensible (as opposed to supposedly rational Westerners). In so doing, he risks assuming a self-righteous

4. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 203.

position and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Treated as irrational, the Iranian side in a negotiation is likely to become so.[5]

2. The past matters: Be aware of Iran's historical greatness, its recent weakness, and its grievances from decades or centuries before.

Iranians know well that in pre-Islamic times their country was a world power, ruled a vast empire, and on several occasions defeated even the mighty armies of Rome. The friezes of Persepolis show Iranian kings receiving tribute from dozens of subject peoples. The Iranian plateau is covered with such reminders of Iran's ancient glory, even if popular memory now associates those pre-Islamic monuments with mythological heroes such as Jamshid and Rostam rather than long-forgotten historical kings such as Cyrus and Darius. In more recent times—until the eighteenth century—Iran rivaled the neighboring Ottoman and Moghul Empires and could deal with Western nations on equal terms.

Beginning in the 1700s, however, Iran lost its great power status. It progressively surrendered territory and influence to outsiders, notably to Britain, Russia, and (later) the United States. The nineteenth century saw multiple humiliations for Iran: bankruptcy, military defeats, and losses of territory and authority in Afghanistan, central Asia, and Transcaucasia. By means of the notorious capitulations and concessions, foreigners, who enjoyed immunity from Iranian law, gained control of the country's finances and natural resources, including oil, and even its security forces.[6] Iranians escaped overt colonization only because the rival British and Russians checked each other and thus kept the country feeble but nominally independent.

In the twentieth century, the degradations continued. Foreign powers formally divided Iran into spheres of influence (by the Anglo-Russian treaty of 1907), occupied the country (during both world wars), backed provincial separatist movements (in 1945–46), and frustrated Iranians' attempts to gain control of their own destiny by suppressing the Constitutional Movement (in 1906–11) and by overthrowing Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh's nationalist government (in 1953).

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5. See chapter 3 for a description of how the British fell into the "we are reasonable and they are crazy" trap in 1951–53.

6. "Capitulations" granted foreigners (and Iranians with foreign patronage) legal immunity from Iranian law. "Concessions" were economic privileges and monopolies, which the perpetually bankrupt Qajar monarchs sold to foreign entrepreneurs to raise quick cash.

History, or at least some version of it, will be very much alive for Iranian negotiators. Like all of us, Iranians are captives of their history. In their case, however, that history is a very long and tragic one. What Iranians remember is likely to be some disastrous event that in the retelling has grown and transformed itself into near mythology. With such memories, suggesting that an Iranian interlocutor forget the past or move on is unlikely to meet with much success or response beyond puzzlement or hostility.

Iranian negotiators may never mention history explicitly (unlike Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, whose one-hour meetings famously began with thirty minutes of Old Testament and twenty minutes of Holocaust, or Yasir Arafat, who loved to dwell on past injustices to the Palestinians to the exclusion of anything else). Depending on the Iranian negotiator's cultural orientation, however, one or more of the following events will have shaped his approach to the issue under discussion:

- the Arab invasion and defeat of Iran's pre-Islamic Sassanian Empire in the seventh century CE;
- the civil wars of early Islamic history, climaxing in the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Hussein b. Ali, at Karbala in 680 CE;
- the constitutional revolution and its failure, 1906–11;
- the tripartite Allied (British, Soviet, and American) occupation of Iran, 1941–45;
- the foreign-backed separatist movements in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, 1945–46;
- the overthrow of Prime Minister Mosaddegh and the restoration of the shah, 1953;
- the exile of Ayatollah Khomeini, 1964, partly because of his public opposition to the law granting immunity to American military advisers and their family members in Iran;
- the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 and its bloody aftermath, including the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88; and
- the United States and others' siding with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and the downing of an Iranian civilian airliner by the USS *Vincennes* in July 1988.

Most of these events ended badly for Iranians (or at least for some Iranians) and have created a profound sense of national victimization and grievance that still pollutes the country's political atmosphere. Even where the

events, in the view of some, did not end badly, the lesson that Iranians often draw from their history is one of "us alone against a hostile world." As a result, Iranian counterparts may come to a negotiation with a view that their nation's history, despite the glories of the distant past, has too often featured defeat, tragedy, victimization, and betrayal.

Because of this history, negotiators for the Islamic Republic will see themselves as holding the weaker position. With that view, and with their reading of Iran's historical experience, they may maintain that the other (stronger) party is not negotiating but attempting to use its superior economic, political, and military muscle to compel Iran to accept an unequal agreement. Official Iranian propaganda, for example, always referred to the Iran-Iraq War as the imposed war. Such language connoted Iranian weakness, suggesting that the country was not acting as an independent and sovereign state but was fighting because larger and stronger foreign powers were forcing her to do so. In such a relationship of perceived inequality, the goal of Iranian negotiators becomes obtaining that ill-defined objective "respect" or at least reaching an agreement that they can present as showing Iran to be any country's equal. Such was the case during the 1951–53 oil nationalization crisis, when Prime Minister Mosaddegh was more concerned with redressing past humiliations than with reaching an economic agreement concerning Iran's oil industry.

Many analysts have noted that Iran's central foreign-policy goal is attaining the respect worthy of its size, population, resources, and historical greatness.[7] At the very beginning of its July 2003 proposal for a dialogue with the United States, the Iranian message mentioned the issue of "mutual respect."[8] As a result, Iranian negotiators may approach a discussion with a combination of grandeur and grievance. Whoever negotiates with Iran should be prepared to deal with these contradictory feelings: the belief that others owe Iran deference for its cultural and political glories and the simultaneous belief that powerful outsiders have betrayed, humiliated, and brutalized a weak Iran and will do so again if given the opportunity. In such a setting, phrases like axis of evil and regime change emerging from Washington have confirmed Iranian suspicions that the American government is determined to rid itself of an assertive Islamic Republic—or at least deprive it of its rights.

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7. The journalist Barbara Slavin calls Iran the "Rodney Dangerfield of the Middle East." *Bitter Friends*, 13.

8. See appendix for the text of this proposal.

American negotiators should be aware that their Iranian counterparts' pessimistic view of the past can create its own vicious circle, in which the Iranian negotiators come to suspect that any arrangement the other side accepts must ipso facto be unfair to the Iranian side. In that case, the Iranian negotiators—convinced that the foreigners are (again) cheating Iran and that the Iranian side could have gotten more if it had held out—will refuse to close the deal. If the Iranian negotiators do get more, then their original suspicions are confirmed, and they remain suspicious that even the new and better deal is unfair to Iran. If it was not, why would the other side have accepted it?

Can Iranian negotiators escape the burdens of their country's past? Of course they can, if doing so serves some larger interest. As one Iranian-American observer noted, the Iranians, in an effort to mend fences with their Arab neighbors, now appear willing to overlook the fact that Saudi Arabia and most of the Persian Gulf states were strong financial and logistical backers of Saddam Hussein's Iraq throughout the bloody 1980–88 war. The Iranian side could always bring up that history again, but for the moment the need for normal relations with those Arab states dictates putting aside (if not forgetting) historical grievances.

3. Choose intermediaries with great care.

In any negotiation, and especially in the absence of formal American-Iranian diplomatic relations, a trusted and skilled intermediary can be very useful. Algerian mediators—to whom each side could talk without making an apparent concession to the other—played such a positive role in the 1980–81 negotiations between the United States and Iran to end the American Embassy hostage crisis. With existing reservoirs of mistrust and suspicion making direct contact so difficult, the right intermediary can allow communication without either side appearing to be the party asking for talks. In the recent Baghdad meetings, for example, the Iraqi government could play that role by issuing invitations to Iranians and Americans, who could then say that they were at the table in response to a request from their Iraqi friends.

In contrast to such official, respectable intermediaries, the last thirty years of American-Iranian contact have also featured self-appointed persons and groups who have acted on their own initiative from more questionable motives. As long as there are no official bilateral U.S.-Iranian relations, there will be no shortage of those volunteering their services as channels to this or that influential person within the murky Iranian political universe. Everything about such persons and their claims, however, should be suspect: their contacts, their motives, their veracity, and their ability to deliver.

Such would-be intermediaries, however, know they have an American audience and often exploit it skillfully. They can use the absence of official contact and the known political leanings of their American listeners. They can tell those listeners what they want to hear and attempt to convince them, for example, that

- Iranians are seething with discontent and are ready to make a new revolution with outside support (especially financial) and encouragement;
- this or that Iranian diaspora group has millions of followers inside Iran who are just waiting for the right moment to launch an uprising;
- a particular ethnic group (e.g., Kurds or Azeris) or region (e.g., Baluchistan) is ready, with outside support, to make trouble for the central government by challenging its authority in an entire province;
- most Iranians would welcome American efforts to overthrow the Islamic Republic, even by force if necessary.; and
- the leaders of the Islamic Republic are ready to moderate their policies and require only a gesture from the United States to show support for policies of some (imaginary) moderate Iranian faction.

U.S.-Iranian relations are littered with the wreckage of ill-judged attempts to use problematic intermediaries. The lawyers Christian Bourguet and Hector Villalon, for example, were doing a profitable business with Iran when they offered their services as intermediaries during the 1979–81 hostage crisis. Eventually, their efforts led nowhere because their Iranian contacts had no power beyond the doors of their own offices. The notorious wheeler-dealer Manouchehr Ghorbanifarr—teamed up with NSC staffer Oliver North—almost brought down an American president (Ronald Reagan) by manipulating and misrepresenting the views of all sides during the notorious arms-for-hostages deal of 1985–86. Despite Ghorbanifarr's well-documented shortcomings as an intermediary, some American officials continued to deal with him as late as 2002.

Such persons should be dealt with warily, if at all. They can and will drag their American contacts into the mud of Iranian political swamps and use their contacts to gain respectability and further their own political and financial fortunes. One should be especially wary if such intermediaries claim purely disinterested or humanitarian motives and declare, "Of course I want nothing for myself. I just want to be of service to both countries." Any variation of the above statement should be a clear warning to stay away.

4. Talk to the right people.

The unique and opaque structure of the Islamic Republic—where duplicating and conflicting authorities inhabit a world of contentious and arcane internal politics—can make it very difficult to understand exactly who has authority and responsibility to make agreements. The conventional wisdom in dealing with the Islamic Republic is: "Everyone is in charge; no one is in charge." Rarely will the other side in any negotiation, however, announce that it is not authorized to make an agreement or does not have the power to carry out a commitment. That unpleasant news usually arrives only after one side believes it has reached a deal.

The American negotiator's tempting explanation for such breakdowns may be oriental duplicity, but the reality is that he has probably been negotiating with the wrong people. He should understand that there are parallel and sometimes competing governing structures within the Islamic Republic. There is a republican system with a written constitution, a presidency, ministries, a parliament, and popular elections. Such a system is familiar to us and resembles, at least in appearance, parliamentary and presidential systems in other countries. In this system, titles more or less reflect responsibilities, and fundamental laws limit terms of office and establish mechanisms for accountability. The Iranian parliament, for example, must confirm nominated ministers and can dismiss them by votes of no-confidence.

Alongside this republican system, however, there exists a second, revolutionary or theocratic structure that operates outside and independent of the formal government structure and its legal limitations. At the head of this parallel system is an exclusive men's club of about twenty-five senior clerics who share an ideology and taste for political and economic power. Those within this inner circle have held, with varying titles, the reins of power in the Islamic Republic since its beginnings in 1979.[9] This system emerged from the chaos of 1979–80, when the existing civil administration, police, and military had collapsed and the new regime found itself in a struggle for power with ethnic separatists, armed militias, and dissidents from across the political spectrum. Distrusting the civil and military institutions it had inherited from the monarchy, the victors of the revolution created new, parallel structures, such as the Revolutionary Guards (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]) as a private security force, the revolutionary courts to administer summary justice to opponents, and the Ansar-e-Hezbollah (literally, "the supporters of the Party of God"). This last group was to be

9. For further discussion of this elite, see Limbert, *Iran: At War with History*, 145–49.

the new regime's enforcer and goon squad assigned to intimidate opponents and fight the vicious street battles of the time against nationalists, students, women's rights advocates, Marxists, and the hated liberals.[10]

In the provinces, governors (employees of the Interior Ministry) found themselves powerless, dwarfed by the local imam's representative and Friday prayer leader (who was often the same person). During the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guards were organized into front-line units, whose role eclipsed that of the regular military. In the March–April 2007 crisis over detained British military personnel, it was clear that the guards' maritime units—not the Iranian navy—were the forces involved in this action. Throughout this crisis, the role and the attitude of the official Iranian government remained unclear.

In a negotiation, these ambiguities will affect how the Iranians will look at the American side. The American government's separation of powers can create similar confusion among Iranians about who speaks with authority for the United States. In the summer of 1979, for example, an ill-timed congressional resolution denouncing summary executions by Iran's new revolutionary authorities negated the effects of more positive statements by executive branch officials. This so-called Javits Resolution—although it had no legal effect—sabotaged American efforts to establish normal working relations with Tehran, including appointing a new ambassador. Twenty years later, after Secretary Albright had made her offer to enter negotiations without preconditions, one heard Iranians complain that they were uncertain about the sincerity of the American offer. Although both President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright had explicitly endorsed the proposal, Iranian analysts continued to see a trap or could not believe that even the president and secretary of state could speak authoritatively. Despite the clear endorsements, the response from Iran was, "But we are hearing conflicting statements, and we're not sure what to believe."[11]

5. Understand that the Islamic Republic's priority is survival and its leaders' priority is to stay in power.

Iran's leaders see themselves surrounded by enemies seeking their removal and the Islamic Republic's overthrow. They see American forces in

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10. In 1979–80 these groups operated under the supervision of the shadowy Revolutionary Council. That body took charge of the government after Mehdi Bazargan's provisional government collapsed in November 1979.

11. Exchange between the author and Professor Sadeq Zibakalam, University of Tehran. Carried by *Radio Azadi* (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), September 6, 1999.

Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, and the Persian Gulf; they see hostile Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and central Asia; they see hostile Arabs to the south and west; they see hostile Turkic peoples to the west and north; they see nuclear-armed states in India, Pakistan, and Israel; and they see hostile Azeri irredentists to the north, Baluchi separatists to the southeast, and both Kurdish and Arab separatists to the west. When these leaders hear terms like "regime change" and "axis of evil" out of Washington, such rhetoric confirms what they already suspect: that the United States is determined to overthrow the Islamic Republic, using subversion if possible and force if necessary.

Under these conditions, the leaders of Iran will do what they believe they must do to ensure their and their regime's survival. With survival at stake, they will vacillate between extremes of concession and brutality according to which better serves their immediate purpose. Near the end of the Iran-Iraq War, in June 1988, for example, they suddenly executed hundreds of political prisoners—some of whom had already served their sentences—for reasons still unclear.[12] Although willing to sacrifice thousands of their country's young men in the swamps of Khuzistan and southern Iraq during the 1980–88 war, Iran's leaders were not ready to sacrifice themselves and their positions. Thus, in August 1988 they accepted a humiliating cease-fire deal with Iraq when they realized their continuing the war threatened to bring down the whole structure of the Islamic Republic. They have made alliances with the non-Islamic (Armenia), the anti-Islamic (Russia), and the godless (North Korea) at the expense of their fellow Muslims in Azerbaijan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. They have allied themselves with Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and overlooked his role in eliminating Lebanese Shia leader Imam Musa Sadr. They have supported terrorist groups and operations to eliminate dissidents abroad. Believing Iran vulnerable to a Czech-style Velvet Revolution, they have lashed out and arrested, imprisoned, harassed, and murdered domestic opponents, including women, harmless dissidents, and intellectuals whom they somehow see as a threat. Then, when driven to the wall, they have made sudden reversals of policy, as they did when, despite their earlier defiant statements, they accepted the UN cease-fire resolution in 1988 and when, in 2003, they offered to discuss a comprehensive political settlement with the Americans, whose victorious army was camped on their western frontier.

12. For more on these executions, see Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 209–28.

Facing this wary view of the world from their Iranian counterparts, American negotiators have both a problem and an opportunity. On the negative side, American negotiators will encounter an assumption of bad faith and a wall of suspicion and mistrust from Iranian counterparts. The Iranians will take for granted that America's ultimate purpose in dealing with Iran is not to reach agreement but is to destroy the Islamic Republic and remove its leaders from power. On the positive side, a discussion can progress if negotiators can reassure the Iranian side that agreement will not destabilize the Islamic Republic and may, in fact, allow it to survive.

Tehran's cooperation with the United States during the 2001–02 negotiations on Afghanistan is a case in point. At that time, the Iranians understood very well how they would benefit from the downfall of the Taliban regime and from its replacement by an Afghan government that did not subscribe to a radical anti-Shia and anti-Iranian ideology. Similar considerations should apply in the case of Iraq, where the Islamic Republic, in the interest of its own survival, shares the American aversion to a divided Iraq, an Iraq dominated by Sunni religious extremists, or an Iraq under a militant Arab nationalist—a new version of Saddam Hussein.

6. Let the Iranians define what is in their national interest.

Iranians do not appreciate hearing lectures from others on what is logical and what is in their (i.e., Iranians') self-interest. Misreading Iranian interests has led to serious problems in the past. In 1979, for example, American policymakers assumed that Iran's underlying economic and security interests—such as historical animosity to Russia and Iraq—would limit the new leaders' anti-American actions to rhetoric and symbolism. Such an analysis may have been correct as far as it went, but it failed to consider the interests of subgroups and factions in provoking a confrontation and sabotaging any possibility of a normal relationship between Washington and the new government in Tehran. These groups were willing to sacrifice American arms supplies and other Iranian vital interests to serve their own political ambitions and to eliminate their domestic rivals. In 1979–80, such groups ridiculed the whole idea of national interest. By creating an atmosphere of hysteria and fear, they ensured the ultimate victory of radical and absolutist factions in the revolutionary coalition over their nationalist and leftist rivals.

The Iranian negotiator knows very well what serves his national, partisan, family, and personal interests. Such interests may differ from—and may even contradict—what an outsider, largely unaware of the factional infighting in

progress, believes is in Iran's national interest, a concept that has been enormously suspect and hotly debated since the 1979 revolution.[13]

The same consideration applies to logic and illogic. American negotiators should be wary of repeating British actions during the 1951–53 oil crisis, when the British representatives portrayed themselves as the only logical party at the table and dismissed the Iranians as hopelessly illogical and emotional. As noted earlier, writing off the Iranians as irrational can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Assume an adversary is illogical, and he will become so. In some cases, the Iranian side is using logic that the American side cannot penetrate—logic dictated by historical grievances, an instinct for personal survival, a feeling of vulnerability, or by other political and social forces poorly understood by outsiders.

7. Understand the Iranian BATNA: Expect actions that may appear (to you) self-destructive.

In negotiation with Iranians, as in all negotiations, it is vital to be aware of the other side's BATNA,[14] as well as one's own. The Iranian negotiators' BATNA may be difficult to predict. In some cases, they may be unwilling to make any agreement lest they come under criticism from political adversaries at home for selling out to the foreigner. Some historians, for example, have argued that Prime Minister Mosaddegh rejected compromise settlements of the 1951–53 Anglo-Iranian oil nationalization dispute out of a desire to benefit from continued political turmoil and out of fear that his domestic political opponents would, using own maximalist rhetoric, accuse him of surrendering to foreign interests. Such an analysis maintains, in effect, that Iranian domestic politics forced Mosaddegh into self-destructive actions.[15]

American negotiators should not convince themselves, "The Iranians will never be so foolish as to do X." In the past, that statement has sometimes become a guarantee that they will do precisely X, driven not by foolishness, but, as noted above, by logic and necessities that the outside observer does not see or understand. In commercial dealings, for example, informants have reported that Iranian negotiators are willing to sabotage an entire deal rather than make some minor concession. Some experts say that Iran's refusal to

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13. Iranian opponents of President Ahmadinezhad, for example, criticize him for goading the Western countries in a way that does not serve Iran's national interests. For his part, Ahmadinezhad might compare his rhetoric to earlier statements by Imam Khomeini in which he subordinated national interest to pan-Islamic ideals.

14. The term was coined by Fisher, Patton, and Ury in *Getting to Yes*.

15. See chapter 3 for Mosaddegh's comment to Vernon Walters on this subject.

negotiate seriously with foreign partners on oil and natural gas contracts has stopped crucial investments and has damaged that sector's ability to maintain long-term supply and revenues.[16]

In such cases, the Iranian negotiator may not have the power to make any reasonable agreement, and the negotiation becomes an exercise in futility. He may also, in a commercial negotiation, for example, be seeking a bribe, either for himself or on behalf of a patron, to close the deal. Finally, he may be what the Iranians call *mard-e-rendi*, someone who outsmarts himself through pursuing short-term gain with a single-mindedness that blinds him to larger and long-term issues at stake. Iranians often impute this kind of behavior to others on whom they look down. Asked about this trait, a senior Iranian diplomat complained to me that he found being *mard-e-rendi* (sometimes made stronger and called *khar* [donkey] *mard-e-rendi*) was an annoying characteristic of Indians and Pakistanis.

In such circumstances, it will be vital to keep the tone of negotiations professional and serious. If talks break down today, they may resume next month. Iranian-American negotiations can fail for many reasons, but when they do, the American side should resist the temptation to conclude, "The talks broke down because Iranians are irrational, unpredictable, and cannot recognize their own interests." Whatever the reason, maintaining a nonjudgmental tone (or, as Fisher would say, keeping the problem separate from the person) will be essential in preserving the possibility that today's failure can become tomorrow's success.

8. Give your Iranian counterparts credit for intelligence.

Iranians have a long history of being treated as simpletons incapable of drawing obvious conclusions from the available evidence. When Britain and Czarist Russia, for example, signed their 1907 treaty that divided Persia into spheres of influence, the preamble stated that both parties pledged to respect Persian independence and territorial integrity. As one contemporary British observer put it, "Such statements are a sure sign that a country is about to lose both its territorial integrity and its independence." More than seventy years later, in October 1979, the American administration thought it could avoid the inevitable and placate Iranian public opinion by announcing that the United States was admitting the deposed shah for purely humanitarian reasons and only for medical treatment. Although someone somewhere may

16. See above for a discussion of the roots of such tactics in a "vicious circle of mistrust."