

Introduction

Any proponents [of seeking areas of agreement with Iran]—in some cases diplomats who had been held hostage in 1979—were treated like the thesis they espoused, as delusional.

—Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran*

A Personal Note

This story begins with a failure. In Tehran on the wet and overcast morning of November 4, 1979, as a political officer assigned to the American Embassy, I took part in a catastrophic breakdown of negotiations with some very unhappy Iranians. What happened was this. About two weeks after our government announced it was admitting the shah of Iran to the United States for medical treatment, several hundred young Iranians, calling themselves Moslem Student Followers of the Imam's Path, stormed the 30-acre U.S. Embassy compound in downtown Tehran. The attackers found a vulnerable spot at the basement level of our two-story chancery (main office), broke into the building, and occupied the basement and first floor. With about a hundred other staff members, both Iranian and American, I found myself barricaded behind a steel door on the second floor. Telephone calls to what passed for Iranian government offices at the time (officially known as the provisional government) brought no help.¹ From that quarter, we heard only evasive responses and vague promises from officials unwilling or unable to act. In the meantime, we knew that some of our colleagues—including our security officer, our press officer, and others outside the steel door—were in serious danger from the attacking crowd.

What could we do? Our appeals to officials at the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the prime minister's office had elicited only questions about when their American visas would be ready. (Obviously they were hedging their bets on the outcome of Iran's ongoing political turmoil.) Our chargé d'affaires, Ambassador Bruce Laingen, along with political chief Victor Tomseth and security officer Michael Howland, had gone earlier that morning to the For-

1. At that time, power in Iran had passed from the official, provisional government, to a collection of revolutionary institutions and vigilante groups that operated under ambiguous lines of authority to a Revolutionary Council and to senior clerics and which ignored and contradicted the prime minister and his officials.

eign Ministry and were now urging the officials of that hapless institution to react decisively to this latest challenge to their authority. By radio, we advised our three colleagues at the Foreign Ministry to stay away from the embassy for their own safety and to persuade those nominally in charge of the Iranian government to assume their responsibility for the safety of diplomatic personnel. We were also in telephone contact with Washington—where it was about 3:00 am on a Sunday. For our colleagues there, however, the usual ways of helping, such as direct high-level calls to Iranian officials, were not available. Any Iranian representative willing to take a call from Secretary of State Cyrus Vance or one of his deputies would have been in no position to act on our behalf. And those able to act were not taking calls from Americans.

We were in a fine kettle of Iranian fish. What passed for an Iranian government in those days—Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's provisional government—could not help us. By admitting the ailing, deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi two weeks before (against the clear advice of our chief of mission), our Washington bosses had told us, in effect, that we were expendable. They had, in the eloquent words of a British diplomat writing seventy years earlier, "thrown a stone into the windows here and left [us] to face the policeman. . . . This was, I suppose, a sign that the Persian public opinion was not to be considered."²

If Persian public opinion was not consulted, then that public would express its opinion in a most uncivil way. President Carter had made his decision, and we at the embassy were left to face Iranians' inevitable, angry reaction. When the reaction came, there was little we could do in response. We were on our own; Washington was far away, and, having already done their damage, our leaders there could do nothing to calm the lawlessness and anarchy that ruled the Tehran streets. Whatever was going to be done that morning, we had to do it. At least such was our quick reading of conditions as the angry students battered their way into the compound and pounded at our doors.

No diplomatic mission can operate without protection from its host government. If that host government cannot provide security, then mission members have no business being in the host country. That morning, how-

2. Cecil Spring Rice (British Minister to Tehran) to Valentine Chirol (correspondent of *The Times*), September 1907. Cited in Kazemzadeh, *Britain and Russia in Persia*, 500. Spring Rice is referring to the announcement of the 1907 Anglo-Russian agreement that divided Iran into British and Russian spheres of influence and about which his own government had kept him in the dark.

ever, we were there, and we had to manage as best we could. Our priorities were two: keep everyone in the embassy safe, and delay the attackers as long as possible until cooler, more rational heads in Tehran had a chance to act. We also had to prevent our U.S. Marine security guards from shooting the attackers, a circumstance that would have led to a general bloodbath. The corpse of a dead demonstrator paraded through the streets of Tehran would have meant our facing tens of thousands of attackers instead of just the hundreds who had climbed over the compound walls. In the last analysis, none of us had any qualms about surrendering the unloved and unlovely embassy building if doing so was the price of avoiding a massacre.

With the nominal Iranian authorities in paralysis and no sign of help arriving from any other direction, I made one of the most foolish decisions of my Foreign Service career. I went out the barricaded steel door and met the attacking students on the second floor landing. The point, if there was one, was to calm the situation, ensure our safety, and see if we could talk them out of continuing their break-in. No one pushed me out the door. As one of the few American Persian-speakers at the embassy, I felt I had to make a try. It was a terrible idea, but nobody had a better one at the time.

I ended up on the landing facing a group of young people who were very excited and much disorganized. The situation was full of what Iranians call *sholugh*, a state in which everyone talks at once, no one listens to anyone else, and everyone gives orders, but no one takes them. I can still recall the students shouting at each other, and one of them in particular shouting at me and his friends in a thick Isfahani accent—an accent I had always associated (and still associate) with Iranian film comedians.

In my earlier experiences as a high school teacher and a university professor in Iran, I had found that I could sometimes defuse tense classroom situations and avoid confrontations by using humor, indirection, and carefully worded phrases that masked an unpleasant reality in euphemisms. As a proctor of an unruly group of university exam-takers, for example, I would tell the students, “Ladies and gentlemen. Please do not do anything that might lead to a misunderstanding on my part.” The students understood perfectly my point—don’t cheat on this exam (or don’t let me catch you cheating)—but my avoiding any words of threat and not using the unpleasant and confrontational expression “cheat” gave the students the chance to demonstrate their magnanimity without appearing to yield to pressure.

Now I was playing in a high-stakes poker game with a pair of deuces in my hand. What had worked with unruly students ten years earlier just might work again. In any case, there were few alternatives. As far as we at the

embassy knew, the authorities of the Iranian provisional government, despite their assurances, were not sending any rescue force to expel the attackers. Armed resistance from the handful of the embassy's Marine guards would have made the situation much worse. So I spoke to the attackers with the scolding attitude of a university professor—formal, distant, and measured. With a tone of deep personal disappointment, I asked them, "Do you understand how badly you are behaving? Does your government approve of what you are doing? Does the Revolutionary Council? What sort of behavior [from educated people] is this?" I then told them, "I would strongly advise you to get out of the embassy compound before you find yourselves in even deeper trouble."

In the meantime, my colleagues behind the door were being as helpful as they could. One called out, "We have just heard on the radio that Ayatollah Khomeini has ordered a unit of revolutionary guards to the embassy to clear out the attackers." Would that he had done so!

The agitated students were having none of it. These were not my rebellious university test-takers of ten years before. Not the fabrication about revolutionary guards, not my professorial arrogance, and certainly not my expressions of deep disappointment at their outrageous behavior made the slightest impression. They sensed they now held the upper hand and were not going to let their advantage slip away. The end was swift and obvious. After a few minutes of shouted exchanges, they tied me up, put a gun to my head, and threatened to shoot me and the captive embassy regional security officer if my colleagues did not open the barricaded door. A few minutes later (to my great relief), the door opened, our staff became prisoners, and fourteen months of captivity began.

Doing It Better

I have often relived the events of that morning and my failure as a negotiator. I have asked myself, "What were the flaws in my negotiating technique? What other message or attitude might have persuaded the students to call off their attack? Should we have called their bluff at the steel door? Was there anything I could have done or said in that situation that would have changed the outcome?"

Years later, I joined a workshop in negotiation at Harvard Law School. The professor was Roger Fisher, master negotiator and coauthor of the classic *Getting to Yes*. Fisher and his colleagues introduced me to many useful ideas for successful negotiation. We discussed BATNAs (Best Alternative to

a Negotiated Agreement), objective criteria, underlying interests, “yessable” propositions, preserving relationships, separating the person from the problem, and so on. The unanswered question for me, however, remained: what could or should I have done differently on November 4, 1979?

Professor Fisher’s course never answered that question, but it did provide some assurance that the events of that day—and what followed—were of a nature to frustrate even someone using the best negotiating techniques. At one point during the class, Fisher pulled me aside to describe how he, during the long crisis, had spoken by phone to Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, one of the most influential leaders in Tehran after Ayatollah Khomeini himself. Fisher admitted that his conversations with Beheshti, although interesting, had had no visible effect on ending our captivity. I could take some comfort in the realization that even Harvard’s international grand master of negotiations could not, at the end of the day, do any better than I had done outside the steel door.

Would anything have worked better on that day? Probably not. The situation had already gone too far—and deteriorated too much—to be saved by face-to-face discussions between members of an excited crowd and a frightened, unarmed American diplomat. As Fisher might have put it, the students attacking the embassy saw their BATNA as better than anything we could offer. Thus, they had no reason to reach any agreement.

Although November 4, 1979, was a loss, that day’s disastrous end did not, in my view, change the reality that there are principles that can guide the American who finds himself in a negotiation—commercial, political, or other—with an Iranian counterpart. Our frustration on that Sunday morning did not mean that negotiation with Iranians is never possible. If anything, that particular failure was one of policy, not negotiation. A series of bad policy decisions—admitting the shah to the United States; leaving a large, unprotected diplomatic staff in Tehran; and failing to recognize the new and dangerous realities in post-revolutionary Iran added to the whole shameful history of American-Iranian relations over the previous twenty-five years—meant that my negotiation attempts were doomed before they started. On that day, we should not even have been at the bargaining table.

What Has Worked? What Will Work?

With that inauspicious start to my negotiating career, I have set out in the chapters that follow to examine what has worked and what will work (and what has failed and will fail) in negotiating with Iranians. I have assumed

my audience is an American one and have shaped comments and recommendations accordingly. Not all of my case studies describe direct Iranian-American negotiations, although in every case the United States was one of the players, if not always the most important one for Iranians. Yet the American negotiator, whether he represents a university, a private firm, or the U.S. government, can still draw useful lessons from knowing how Iranians negotiated with, for example, the Soviets in 1946–47 and the British in 1951.

Why should we think about negotiations at all when American-Iranian relations for decades have been mired in nastiness—in threats, posturing, and self-righteousness? What kinds of negotiations are possible when each side believes it is completely right and reasonable and the other is completely wrong and irrational? How can the two sides negotiate when each has become the other's worst nightmare? Despite all these negatives, however, I am not convinced that Americans and Iranians are condemned to be enemies for eternity. Each side realizes that the other is not going away soon and that its presence and policies affect conditions in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and other areas that matter to both Tehran and Washington. Under the right conditions, with balanced judgment and sound negotiating strategy, we can still reach understandings that suit the interests of both sides. Most important, we do not have to be friends to do so. After all, if Americans and Iranians could never agree on anything, then today I and my embassy colleagues would probably still be captives in Tehran.

There is much history in this work. For Iranians, history—or at least some version of it—is crucial to shaping the present. For that reason, I have opened with an examination of Iran's historical and cultural constants. In that chapter, I have avoided using terms such as "Iranian character" or "the nature of Shiism" or other such generalizations that have led some analysts—in their search for clarification—into oversimplification, distortion, and unhelpful statements about Iranians' "irrationality," "xenophobia," or "Shiite martyr complex." Such characterizations do not help negotiators. On the contrary, if Americans meet Iranians with the assumption that the latter are irrational and xenophobic by nature, their encounters are almost certain to end in failure.

At the same time, history and culture matter a great deal to Iranians. History has given them a sense of grandeur and grievance—the view that their country, once a world superpower that received tribute from dozens of subject nations, has been the feeble plaything of powerful outside forces for at least the last three centuries. The effective American negotiator need not

be a scholar of Iranian history, but he should be aware of how that history has influenced his Iranian counterparts' positions.

For example, how many of the American negotiators who dealt with the issue of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in Iraq—where Iran played a crucial role—were aware of the importance of this issue in recent Iranian history? How many American negotiators knew about capitulations and the events of 1964 in Iran—events that gave the outspoken cleric Ruhollah Khomeini credibility with the nationalist heirs of Mosaddegh? How many know about the infamous 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchai, which, in the wake of a disastrous Persian military defeat, first granted judicial immunity to foreigners in Iran? Yet, these events and others stretching even to pre-Islamic times—with all of their glory and humiliation—will affect how Iranians, carrying all the burdens of their long history, approach a negotiation and look at their counterparts.

The four historical case studies of negotiation successes and failures, presented in chapters 2 through 5, are the foundation of this work. The intention is not to write new histories of these events but to examine them for lessons to help tomorrow's negotiator. Chapter 6 collects and elaborates on the suggestions highlighted in the case studies. In each case, American negotiators will find lessons to be learned, both positive and negative; and in each case there are clear instances of good judgment, misjudgment, realism, self-deception, self-interest, and self-destruction. The four case studies are

- **The Azerbaijan crisis of 1945–47**, in which the Iranians—although divided among themselves and holding few cards in their hands—successfully balanced competing foreign and domestic interests and preserved their country's independence and territorial integrity against very long odds. With limited American support, Iranians were able to negotiate occupying Soviet troops out of Iran and restore their authority over the country's richest province.
- **The oil nationalization crisis of 1951–53**, in which both the British and Iranians so demonized each other that agreement became impossible. Washington attempted to mediate between its friends and originally had sympathy for the aspirations of the Iranian nationalists. Preoccupied by Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, however, the Americans eventually came to share the British view that Prime Minister Mosaddegh himself was the problem and had to go.

- **The American Embassy hostage crisis of 1979–81**, in which what began as a 1970s-style student demonstration and sit-in became—after a series of misjudgments on both sides—a major international crisis that brought down an American president and enabled extremists in Tehran to seize undisputed power and bring years of bloodshed and suffering on most Iranians.
- **The Lebanon hostage crisis of 1985–91**, in which both sides—encouraged by self-interested intermediaries—deluded themselves into unrealistic expectations. Both sides lost sight of underlying interests and focused entirely on immediate goals. When circumstances changed and credible mediators became involved, problems that had previously seemed unsolvable were eventually settled. This chapter is in two parts.
 1. The arms-for-hostages (Iran-Contra) bargaining of 1985–86 in which both sides seemed to compete in outsmarting themselves.
 2. UN mediation and freeing the Lebanon hostages, 1989–91, in which competent mediation and the fortuitous miscalculations of Saddam Hussein allowed the hostages to go free and Iran to claim it had achieved its long-term goal of a search for justice after the Iran-Iraq war.

These four cases provide instances of both success and failure in negotiations with Iranians and illustrate the role of the historical constants discussed in chapter 1. The Azerbaijan crisis, for example, shows how fragile are stability and unity in the multiethnic state that is Iran. Outside powers, ambitious domestic politicians, tribal and ethnic interests, and other centrifugal forces are always ready to pull apart this easily broken structure. The oil nationalization crisis, with its unfortunate ending in the CIA-engineered coup of August 1953, has reinforced an Iranian sense of historical grievance, betrayal, and victimization.³ Carrying those historical memories, the Iranian side may approach a negotiation with its mind made up (based on recent and not-so-recent experience) that the American side is not interested in reaching agreement—that it is interested only in imposing its will on a humiliated Iran.

For those seeking the essence of the matter (what the Iranians call *lob-e-matlab*), chapter 6 presents fourteen suggestions drawn from the historical case studies in chapters 2 through 5. These suggestions—when combined

3. In his interview with National Public Radio broadcast September 23, 2008, President Ahmadinezhad cited this incident as an example of Iran's continuing grievances against the United States.

with large doses of patience and good fortune—can help American negotiators overcome the persistent stereotypes, rhetoric, mythology, and misconceptions that for thirty years have ensnared Iran and the United States in a tangle of mutual demonization, insults, and recriminations. At one time or another in the examples studied, negotiators applied (or failed to apply) these principles, and negotiations progressed or collapsed accordingly. When they did apply them and enjoyed some measure of good luck—as in the cases of Azerbaijan and the UN mediation to free the Lebanon hostages—the results were usually positive. When ignored or misapplied—as in the case of oil nationalization and the American Embassy hostage crisis, the results usually were to increase misunderstanding and bring the two sides to deadlock and renewed hostility.

The study's final chapter originated in an exchange with undergraduates about ten weeks into a political science course titled "The United States and Iran." As the students looked at Tehran and Washington's disastrous encounters of the last thirty years and at the two sides' seeming inability to identify and act on mutual interests, they concluded, "Given the realities in the region, our long mutual estrangement makes no sense." They asked, "Why should the situation be so? Why all this hostility? Why can neither side act rationally?"

Good questions. I had no ready answers, but I suspect that the reason lies less in reality than in distorted perceptions and in the distressing fact that each side has constructed a mythology and an image of absolute evil in the other. I asked my students how, based on what they had read and learned in the course, they believed Iranians and Americans view each other. Looking at Iran and Iranians as Americans, the students responded with a long list of negative labels, stereotypes, and distortions that were the product of a particular reading of recent history. Then, in a remarkable display of empathy, they did the same thing looking at America and Americans from the Iranian point of view, and produced an equally uncomplimentary list.⁴

This work attempts to go beyond these caricatures and their associated loaded questions, such as, "How can one ever negotiate with them?" and "How can one ever reach agreement with someone who has said or done that?" For behind those questions lies the destructive assumption the other side is infinitely arrogant, dissimulating, crafty, and unreliable. These unhelpful preconceptions about the other side's motives do provide a useful warning: negotiations between Americans and Iranians will not be easy.

4. See chapter 7, for a detailed discussion of these "myth-perceptions."

Negotiators on both sides will have to wrestle with ghosts from their past, and, particularly in the Iranian case, that past is very long, and the ghosts numerous and powerful. History reinforces the above point. In all four cases studied, the path of negotiation was time-consuming, complicated, full of misunderstandings, and littered with the wreckage of failure. That difficult history has created a central reality: in negotiating with the Islamic Republic, the traps are many, and it will be vital to learn from the past and get the process right.

Getting It Right

I hope this book will prove helpful both to those American negotiators dealing with Iran and Iranians next week and to those doing so in five or ten years. I also hope that it does not understate the difficulty in overcoming thirty years of hostility and estrangement. The May and July 2007 Baghdad meetings between Ambassadors Ryan Crocker and Hassan Kazemi-Qomi marked the first official and public bilateral American-Iranian contacts since relations were formally broken during the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in April 1980. The two parties could come to the table then because Iraq's prime minister was the host. Neither side had to invite the other and thus risk rejection, and neither side had to concede anything by accepting an invitation from a third party. By all accounts, the meetings consisted of little more than exchanges of complaints about the other's misdeeds in Iraq, and never dealt with broader issues between the two countries. Yet in the context of decades of insults and threats, even these limited exchanges were progress of a sort. Previous contacts, productive or not, had been indirect, clandestine, or conducted within some multilateral framework. Earlier attempts to establish official dialogue had foundered on pervading suspicions and on fear that domestic political enemies would call any such moves betrayal. At the same time, in both capitals the prevailing view was usually "now is not the time" and "if they want to talk, then they must be up to something."

Like adolescents dealing with a prom invitation (to use Barbara Slavin's apt metaphor), when one side came forward, the other pulled back. Both sides missed opportunities. Tehran—hobbled by internal political disputes—rejected Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's 1998 offer to discuss, without preconditions, a roadmap to better relations. The United States ignored a 2003 Iranian proposal—transmitted through the Swiss in Tehran—to open discussions on all outstanding issues, including a broader Middle East settlement. It is ironic that the United States ignored such an approach

after it had long insisted, in the aftermath of the 1986 Iran-Contra fiasco, that it would talk to Iran only through the official channel of the Swiss protecting power. By all accounts, Washington's refusal to talk in 2003 came from the illusory euphoria following an easy military victory in Iraq and from the view, popular with some in Washington at the time, that (in the phony-macho jargon of the time) real men go to Tehran [in tanks].⁵

In the years ahead, it is possible that Tehran and Washington both may regain an appetite for resolving problems through negotiations rather than through chest-thumping about armored fighting vehicles. If so, we should be under no illusions that progress will be swift. Talking to Iran will still be difficult and unpleasant. Yet the lessons of history in this book can help negotiators avoid some of the missteps that have doomed previous attempts to end the shouting, start conversations, and resolve problems. Many of these points will be obvious to those with experience in negotiation and to those who have dealt with the Middle East in general and Iran in particular.

In the case of Iran, however, there is another difficulty. In the decades since 1980, the American government has lost its cadre of Iran expertise. Through the 1980s and 1990s, it trained few Persian speakers, and those it did train had little opportunity to use the language in a Persian-speaking setting. Eventually those with both language and country experience have aged and retired, leaving a gap that, with the best will in the world, will take at least a decade to fill.⁶

Creating a qualified new cadre will take time. Training someone to a level of professional speaking and reading proficiency in Persian—a process that experts believe requires at least nine months of full-time study—is just the beginning. Understanding nuances, historical references, cultural and class views, and other subtleties will take much longer, ideally through immersion in an Iranian social context. Yet without at least some understanding of these facets of the Iranian outlook, the American negotiator's task will be much harder.⁷

On the other side, few Iranian counterparts are likely to have much understanding of the United States. Iran's cadre of American-educated technocrats has also aged, and a new generation of Iranians from different social

5. The text of the Iranian 2003 proposal is in the appendix.

6. In 2008, for example, Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker was among the last active-duty American diplomats who had ever served in Iran.

7. To quote Bill (*The Eagle and the Lion*, 392), "Persian is a language of great depth and subtlety. Although outwardly grammatically simple, it requires years of study and speaking experience to master adequately."

backgrounds has come to occupy important posts. Even those Iranians who studied in the United States often did so when they were older (most were graduate students) and lived—like many American expatriates in Iran—in an environment unaffected by and remote from the main currents of local life. Although the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent turmoil brought hundreds of thousands of Iranians to the United States, there are fewer and fewer people within the Islamic Republic's elite who have had any direct contact with America and Americans.

Many in power in Iran today—even those with some first-hand experience of the West—have gained their positions by riding waves of anti-American sentiment. Many leaders of the Islamic Republic see the power of American popular culture—without reference to who directs American foreign policy—as a direct threat to the austere strictures of the dominant ideology and, as such, the most serious challenge to the current rulers' control of the state. Ayatollah Khomeini once said that he did not fear America's ships and armies; America's most terrifying weapon, he asserted, was its popular culture, with its power to mislead Iran's young people and to divert them from the militant path of religion and revolution. Iranians' views of the United States are likely to be highly distorted either by the Islamic Republic's official hate machine or by an idealized picture coming from some Iranians' dislike for their own government. According to this latter view, if this government says America is the root of all evil, then America must be the source of all that is beneficent.

Absorbing the lessons of history and following the fourteen suggestions in chapter 6 will help negotiators, but doing so will still not guarantee the success of a negotiation. Expertise and helpful hints by themselves will not always overcome the formidable barriers to that success. Suspicions, festering resentments, and perceived grievances run so deep on both sides that the most skilled and experienced negotiators may still fail—or at least not achieve what is hoped for. One or two negotiating sessions are not going to make people—even those with no personal memories of the events—forget the real or imagined humiliations of the past decades and centuries. Success will require both sides to keep their expectations realistic and measure progress in small and symbolic steps. The key to moving forward will not be forgetting history; it will be acknowledging the power of history while dealing at the same time with the problems of the present and future.

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