

Conversation with Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi
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Ali Goldoust: Dr. Amirahmadi, I am basically looking at the issue of mistrust and its roots in the U.S.-Iran relations and the possibility to move beyond this stagnated paradigm of accusation and mutual demonization that the two states are in it. I follow your website a lot and know that you have been very busy in the last several years to find a way to mediate between the United States and Iran. You organize meetings and conferences, and give lectures, etc. Yet, the situation between the two countries is not very encouraging. I begin with this question: Why have the United States and Iran not been able to engage?

Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi: That is a very good question and a very big question as well!

AG: I mean, historically, what do they have in common that they can base their engagement on and how come they were not able to engage?

HA: Well, they have tried to engage a few times and they have engaged a few times but they have not been able to sustain their engagement. The reason they were not able to sustain their engagement was that their engagement was not based on solid foundation of a better understanding of the grievances that exist between the two sides and the fact of their mutual distrust. They also have often engaged in a wrong way, through wrong channels, while ignoring third party interests.

Let me begin this conversation with a short history of US-Iran relations. Iran and the U.S. were considered good friends before the revolution. However, this friendship only existed between the governments, and not at the level of the people. Even during the era of the Shah, Iranians were not very much interested in U.S.-Iran relations because they felt that the relations were not equitable or fair, that is, relations were not seen as based on a solid, mutual-benefit ground. People were concerned that the Shah's government was not a legitimate government being that the U.S. had imposed that government on the Iranian people and the country through the 1953 coup against the democratically-elected

Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. That coup was engineered by the British Government and assisted by the U.S. So, there were some problems even before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

I would say, basically, the U.S.-Iran relations have more or less gone through three distinct periods. The first period starts from the middle of the 19th century to 1953. This is the period when the Americans in Iran, generally speaking, are the good guys. During this time there was no major animosity and Americans were considered helpful to Iran. In the early stage of this period there were very little interactions between the two, although there were American missionaries in Iran beginning in 1860s. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1883. Generally speaking, their relationship in the formative years was based on humanitarian, educational and religious missions rather than political or economic interactions. This I call the Hajji Washington Period, a designation after the name of Iran's first Ambassador to Washington, Hajji Hossein-Gholi Noori.

At the Turn of the 20th Century, in 1909, an American with the name of Howard C. Baskerville, a graduate of Princeton University, was sent by his church to serve as a missionary teacher in Tabriz. He was shot by the Russians who were fighting the Iranian Constitutionalists in the city. Baskerville continued to be remembered in Iran as a hero until the 1953 coup. In the 1920, the Iranian Government also invited Americans, in increasing numbers, to help with the administrative work – mainly as economic administrators to streamline Iran's finances. The late Morgan Shuster is one such American. When in 1919 the British tried to make Iran into a protectorate, Americans objected. Still the period was a good one; there was no hostility between the two sides. World War II changed the situation to some extent because Iran was invaded by the Allied Forces and the U.S. was one of the invading forces. Iran was not a party to the war but notwithstanding its neutral position, the Allied Forces invaded the country and deposed the Shah Reza Pahlavi and put his son, Mohammad Reza in his place.

In those days, Iran was still under the British domination. Even though it was not a colony, the British treated it as if it were at the least a semi-colony. Under this condition, Americans, with the Allied Forces, entered Iran as occupiers for the first time and used the country to send military equipment to Moscow to fight the Nazis. That was the beginning of certain hostility between the U.S. and Iran because the occupation proved very costly to Iran even if it earned the "Bridge of Victory" fame. But still Americans were not seen as occupiers in the sense of a traditional occupier and the hostilities remained low key until 1953 coup. After the World War II the Allied Forces were to leave Iran and the Americans did leave but the Soviet forces stayed behind helping separatist and communist movements in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. In 1946 the Roosevelt Administration demanded that Stalin withdraw his forces from Iran and recognize the nation's independence. Stalin after some resistance concurred.

That memory of American support for the Iranian territorial integrity helped restore American standing with the Iranians. Meanwhile, the world had become entangled in a Cold War and the Americans and Russians began dividing the new world into their

spheres of influences as so-called capitalist and socialist camps, respectively. Iran remained non-aligned but the Shah increasingly moved into the American orbit. The Iranian pro-Soviet Communist Party, the Tudeh Party, did not like what was happening. It began an anti-American crusade. The 1953 coup made the situation for Americans in Iran even worse. The coup certainly marked a new era in US-Iran and American-Iranian relations.

With the coup, the U.S. and Iran entered into the second period in US-Iran relations. During this period, while the Governments came increasingly closer to each other as allies, the Iranian people became as much more anti-American. During the Cold War years, the younger Iranians, the more radical Iranians, and the more nationalistic Iranians, religious and secular, became increasingly anti-American. These were also supposedly the young socialists who were struggling against the capitalist Iranians and imperialist Americans to save the Iranian working people. America for the first time entered the Iranian political culture as an imperialist power bent in exploiting and dominating the country. After the coup, it was not just the Communists who were anti-American, but also an absolute majority in the nation. That was a major change in the U.S.-Iran relationship.

Relations after 1953 to 1979 Islamic Revolution were basically within the same anti-American, anti-imperialist framework. Meanwhile an increasing number of Iranian capitalists and upper and middle class elements, wealthy people, turned for education to the U.S. and became American educated and pro-American. However, that group remained a minority during the second Pahlavi regime. Still, the majority of Iranians were anti-American. Then, the revolution of 1979 happened marking the beginning of the third period in US-Iran relations, a period that continues to this date. During this period, the more theoretical hostility became increasingly transformed into practical complaints and conflicts. Both sides have by now developed a laundry bag of grievances against each other that some are real and others are fictional.

The revolution in 1979 had basically two goals. One was to fight the dictatorship of the Shah and to establish democracy, and the other one was to fight the domination of America and create an independent Iran. Freedom and independence were the two slogans of the revolution. Independence was directed toward the U.S. domination and freedom was directed toward the dictatorship of the Shah. That is how the Iranian revolution became very much integrated into this idea of anti-Americanism that preceded it. A turning point in the post-revolution came when the young Islamic radicals took American diplomats and embassy employees in Tehran hostage for 444 days. Subsequent developments simply reinforced the hostility and created a situation between the U.S. and Iran that I have in a few places called "a spiral conflict"; a conflict that regenerate itself, a conflict that grows even when the two sides try to be nice to each other.

This short history that I have described led to this spiral conflict that we have today based on real problems, misperception and misunderstanding, leading to mutual mistrust and demonization. In this period of spiral conflict, Iranians never trusted Americans; whatever Americans did, Iranians took as being directed against their national

independence. Added to the original Tudeh political-economy anti-American dogma was now the Islamic cultural, anti-American dogma. The Islamic revolution then added a cultural antagonistic dimension to the Iranian anti-Americanism. The new revolutionaries accused the US of trying to corrupt the Iranian culture and society on top of trying to dominate it politically and economically. So we now have two problems here. While the secular Iranians see America as an arrogant imperialist nation, the more Islamic Iranians see the arrogant power also a decadent power against the Iranian culture.

While the idea of west-toxication (*gharbzadeghi* in Persian), originated in the pre-revolution Iran, it was perfected and practiced after the revolution. So the current US-Iran conflict has a history behind it that does not make the life easy to begin with. Complicating the situation is also a set of post-revolutionary development that further increased their misunderstanding and mistrust. The practical responses on both sides have been fatal. Iranians took Americans hostage, and the Americans would support Saddam Hussein in the war against Iran and shoot down a Iranian civilian air plane; Americans would also impose sanctions on Iran and freeze Iranian assets in the US; Iran would develop a clandestine civilian nuclear technology and support Hezbollah and Hamas against Israel. The list goes on. The American claims against Iran about terrorism, nuclear proliferation, democracy deficit, and opposition to Middle East peace are products of this unfortunate history.

AG: Dr. Amirahmadi many experts say that Iranian people have a positive opinion about the American culture. In your opinion, how do Iranians see America today?

HA: The situation is more complicated. Iranians are very much divided in their opinion of America today. This was the case in the pre-revolutionary time as well. Then the majority was anti-American, a minority pro-American and a few suspended in the middle. Today, the pro- and anti-Americans are in the minority while a large majority has developed a more nuanced position about the U.S. They are neither for nor against the U.S. They want to have good relations with the U.S., a relationship that benefits both nations. I must also add that the Iranian people have, as a whole, become more positive about the West. They do not think of the West or the U.S. in terms of imperialism and the like categories as in the past, and have, generally, a positive view of the global community. They like Europeans, Canadians, Americans, Latin Americans, and everybody else. The only three nations that many Iranians still have an aversion to are the Arabs, Israelis and the Russians. Even toward these nations Iranians are developing realistic opinions.

The West has been an attractive and exotic place for the contemporary Iranians. They have always modeled their development, their democracy, their reform movements, and their laws after the West. So, they like the West and they like the U.S. not because they like the American or European cultures or Governments, but because these countries are the producers of modern civilizations, institutions and technologies. They are impressed with America because of its technological achievements as opposed to its cultural advances. They respect this country for its modernizing impact on the contemporary world, but I do not think that you can call that feeling pro-American. Most Iranians now

want to develop a more realistic and balanced relationship with the U.S.; a respectful relationship that is mutually beneficial; a relationship that respects the integrity and independence of both sides. The young Iranians do not just see things as black and white but are seeking to discover the gray areas. They see issues that divide and unite the two nations and wish to focus on the unifying interests.

AG: Actually, Dr. Amirahmadi, that common interest was going to be my next question. For the United States, what are the long-term benefits of engagement with Iran? I must recall that you speak of these benefits a lot in your articles, your lectures, and your website.

HA: Sure! Iran is a very big country. Iran has the longest history in the region; Iran is the first empire builder in the world; Iran is geographically vast, climatically varied, and culturally diverse; Iran has a huge civilizational region, the Norouz Land; Iran is materially very rich: it has the vastest infrastructure in the region; it has the second largest natural gas reserve in the world and the fourth largest oil reserve in the world; It is the second largest OPEC producer; It is a country with almost all types of minerals; Iran is a country of 75 million people who have traditionally been the most eager consumers of Western commodities. Iran offers tremendous investment opportunities in sectors as diverse as agriculture, oil, industries, tourism, transportation, finance and new technologies. Iran has a strategic geography in the most strategic world region: It is right in the middle of two seas, between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and borders 15 countries in land and water. It is an energy and political geography, sitting right at the center of the geography of oil and conflict, a geography that makes it both a pivotal and an encore state.

Iran lives in the neighborhood of the nuclear states, the Arab-Israeli conflict, rival superpowers, and emerging markets. Iran is obviously a major country and if the United States wants to really stay a world power in the next 50 years, it can not afford not to have Iran on its side. Iran is not just another Saudi Arabia whose significance is based only on its oil riches and being the birth place of Islam. Iran is much more! Iran, historically, has been a leader in the East. If the U.S. is a leader in the West, Iran has had the Eastern leadership for centuries. Iranians were representing the East in its struggle against the West -- Greeks, Romans, British, and Americans. So, Iran is a major country. I mean, if you want to be a superpower or even a regional power or a continental power, you need Iran on your side. Americans understand Iran's significance though not always. Americans never forgave themselves for "losing" Iran in 1979, and they want to gain it again. They want to do everything in their power to get Iran back to their side.

Iran on the side of the America's rivals could be very dangerous to its national interests. We now have a situation where very tough Russia and China are emerging stronger and stronger every day. The U.S. which thought it had won the Cold War may soon lose it again! It may have won the Cold War against the Soviet Union but a whole new Cold War is developing for the U.S. against the Russian Federation and perhaps China. The problem is that this time America is a lonely superpower that does not even have Europe on its side whole heartily. So, the U.S. cannot afford not to have Iran on its side; indeed,

the well being of the Americans in the long-term will, more or less, depend on their relationship with Iran. I think that is one reason why Americans are not simply ignoring Iran. If Iran was not important, if it did not matter to the U.S., the United States could simply forget about it. But, Iran is not a country to be ignored or forgotten.

AG: If the United States knows the importance of Iran, then, why does it use this adversarial narrative towards Iran; these antagonistic policies towards Iran?

HA: There are three reasons. One, the U.S.-Iran relationship is not just the U.S.-Iran relationship. There are others that create serious troubles for this relationship. Indeed, the US-Iran relationship is the crossroad of all types of other interests. They are Arabs, Israelis, Turks, Russians, the Chinese, and the Europeans. None of them really ever wanted the U.S. and Iran get into a healthy relationship because everyone in its own way benefits from the abnormal relations. The second problem, I believe, relates to the way the relationship has been handled in both sides. Neither side has had sufficient understanding of the stakes in the relationship or great ideas for better relations. The leaders in both sides at best have spoken their mind for the interest of their own nation but hardly had they expressed willingness for common interests and mutual benefits of the two nations. They also need to account for the interests of the third parties. For example, Americans need to account for the interests of the Arabs and Israelis while Iranians need to consider the interests of the Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Iraqi Shi'a.

A third and most important reason relates to a profound misperception about Iran, that “a strong Iran as a dangerous Iran.” Iran’s nuclear crisis is the product of this misperception. When Britain had India as its most prized colony in the mid-Nineteenth Century, it saw in Iran a possible rival (Iran had conquered India before Britain had) and decided that Iran’s power should be contained. While Britain had a limited purpose, Iran’s enemies over time advanced the idea that a strong Iran was a dangerous Iran and that a weaker Iran was the best for its region. Indeed, the idea constitutes the conceptual foundation of current sanctions against Iran by the US and the United Nations Security Council. It was based on this same idea that the West did not want Iran to build railways in the 1920s, or steel mill plants in the 1960s, or nationalize its oil or successfully implement its democratic movement in 1950s. Currently, the West does not want Iran to enrich uranium. The fact that Iran has not initiated any conflict against its neighbors in the last 200 or so years is conveniently ignored by its antagonists.

Indeed, the contemporary Iranian history is witness to an opposite experience: that anytime Iran has been weak, its region has been more unstable while a strong Iran has been often a guarantor of stability. The fact that a strong Iran was a better Iran for the region was successfully tested by the Nixon Doctrine in the 1970s. However, the Shah’s mismanagement of domestic politics brought that short-lived experience to a halt by the 1979 revolution. The post-revolutionary weak Iran encouraged Saddam to invade the country and that episode led to Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait and then to two US wars against Iraq. Iraq today is in a sense the product of a weak Iran. We should not ignore the fact that the Iranian leaders are also a cause for the wrong perception about a strong Iran. They often speak in words that are threatening to rivals and make claims that are often

unreal or simply inflated. The present government is a master at such a false and dangerous propagandist approach. Iran's past imperial culture also feeds into these rather naïve power-projectionist proclamations.

A similarly troubling misperception of Iran's power is that it is currently on the rise. Coupled with the misperception that a strong Iran is a dangerous Iran, the rising power argument has given the nation's enemies the fuel to further isolate it politically and cripple it economically in order to contain "the Iranian threat." The argument is based on the disappearance of Iraq as a regional bulwark against Iran, Iran's success in enriching uranium, elimination of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the rising stature of the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas. The fact that Iran has a weak economy; is technologically still a consumer rather than an innovator; and that its so-called military might is based on no solid foundation is conveniently ignored. There are two groups that are making the rising power argument: one group would like to see the US and Iran in a military conflict, justifying this position by arguing that a powerful Iran is a dangerous Iran. Israel and its lobby are in this camp. The other group, which includes some of Iran's friends, would like to see the US negotiate with Iran. However, the Bush White House is not interested in talking with a strong or rising-power Iran. Instead, the Administration has narrowed its option to reducing Iran's power or changing its regime.

AG: Dr, Amirahmadi, what are the negative aspects of the current U.S. policies towards Iran? What is it that the United States is missing, because of this lack of relationship? We just talked about the positive aspects of engagement.

HA: America is losing significantly as we speak. First is the very simple economic loss. The U.S. had 15-20 billion dollar of trade deal with Iran during the later years of the Shah. The U.S. was Iran's second trade partner after Germany. The United States these days is nowhere in the category of major traders with Iran. Meanwhile Iran's annual imports have reached beyond \$60 billion with annual export earnings in the area of \$100 billion. So, there is this economical loss on the U.S. side. Second, Iran is a country that has tremendous oil reserves. Although, until recently the oil have been inexpensive and affordable, but because of this long drawn conflict between the U.S. and Iran, very little investment has gone into creating new sources of oil. Therefore, there is increasing shortage of supply against the rising demand for oil and that has pushed the prices to over \$100 a barrel; and America is going to pay more for oil as the U.S. becomes more oil dependent in decades to come. I think America wants to have its allies as stable and secure as possible in the region, and for that reason it also needs better relations with Iran.

The biggest immediate U.S. problem is Iraq: its political instability and expenses it is incurring there -- billions of dollars that is being spent there. That is partly because somehow the Iraqi forces listen more to Iran than to the U.S. There are also other long term consequences for the U.S. For example, Americans used to be in Iran, they used to bring Iranians into the U.S. to get American education, so Iranian political elite was increasingly American educated. All of that has gone now and increasingly there are very few high ranking Iranian politicians who are trained in the U.S. and as a result, the U.S. is losing its strategic advantage within the Iranian polity. It just does not have the

kind of pro-American politicians in Iran that it used to have. Iranian politicians are now educated in London, in Australia, in Europe, in Canada, but increasingly less in the U.S. That is another structural disadvantage that the U.S. faces and this particular disadvantage is going to harm the American interest the most even after the U.S. establish ties with Iran. It will take years for the U.S. to produce the kind of pro-American elite that it had in the country under the Shah.

AG: With the existing government in Iran, what would be a reasonable course of action for the United States to take? What should they do?

HA: Well, the first and foremost, the two sides must respect each other, and must speak to each other and about each other in respectful tones, words, voices and concepts. Using words like Satan and Evil are not just demeaning and demonizing; they are also inaccurate as descriptions of what the two nations are. Neither the US is a Satan nor Iran an Evil. But, it is not just enough for each side to speak of the other nation as being great, etc. The two governments must also acknowledge each other's legitimacy and refuse to intervene in each other's internal affairs. Unfortunately both the US and Iran use public diplomacy to win support from the people but do so with a view to create a wedge between the people and their government. The US is particularly keen about winning Iranians against their government. Iranians are a proud nation and so are the Americans. They are nationalistic, even jingoistic at times! Treating them with less than full respect is most counterproductive.

The second most important thing that both sides need to do is to recognize that lots of what goes between the United States and Iran are not just the U.S.-Iran relationship issues. Terrorism is a global issue today. Proliferation of the nuclear technology is not just a U.S.-Iran relationship issue; it is a global issue. Human rights are the same; it is a global issue. The peace between the Arabs and Israelis is only indirectly a U.S.-Iran relationship issue. They are all regional and global issues. So, they need to realize that these are all global issues, and not just the U.S.-Iran issues. They have to realize this and they need to deal with them as such. That is number one. That is to say they have to approach this issue realistically and globally. They have to seek solutions for them as global issues; they have to seek solutions for them as integrated issues, as issues that are inter-related. They must not see them as isolated issues that require isolated solutions.

The third is that both American and Iranian need to be realistic about their domestic situation. I think there is a lot of myth on both sides about how the other side looks. The Iranian Government sees the American Government as an arrogant entity of an imperialistic nature that offers nothing good; the U.S. Government is bent to destroy the Islamic Republic and that every thing the U.S. does is designed to destroy the country, to underdeveloped Iran. The U.S. also sees Iran in a very negative light; it sees Iran as an illegitimate government that has no popular appeal, no rationality for its policies or actions, that everybody hates this government and that they are going to overthrow the Islamic regime the next day if they could, that Iranians are miserable under this regime, that there is no good life at all, that everybody is waiting for the U.S. troops to arrive in Tehran to save them! All these are of course nonsense. So, I think it is very critical that

both sides develop realistic perspectives of each other; they have to see each other as what they actually are.

Fourth, they have to realize that there is absolutely not a single issue in the U.S.-Iran relations that cannot be negotiated. Every issue in U.S.-Iran relationship is negotiable. So, the problem is not with the issues that stand between the U.S. and Iran, but the problem is with the political will and procedural matters. The two sides need to develop that political will to engage and find the starting point to engage together. Unfortunately we have a series of problems here. For example, in an interview with Radio Farda I likened the U.S. and Iran to a couple that love each other and they even decide to go to the bed and then in the bed, they start fighting about who should be on the top and who should be under! Yet, it does not matter who is under or over; the important thing is the action! The bottom line is that it is a procedural matter. Indeed, who should be under is really at the heart of the U.S.-Iran engagement problem. That is why they have all these pre-conditions. "If you stop doing this, then I will start doing that." I think the U.S. and Iran should start thinking about the fact that it does not matter who really starts. This is a much bigger game to be procedurally blocked. In fact the one who takes the first step will be remembered as a leader later!

Fifth, I think they have to realize that in this particular game there should not be pre-conditions. There should be equality from the minute they start. They should be respectful to each other and should not see each other in imperial terms; that I am the bigger and more important side than you are and therefore you have to obey me. I think they should start thinking about each other in a positive term. Even if they see negatives, they should leave the negatives aside and focus on positives. They should stay more with the issues that bond them rather than the issues that divide them. If they begin to do these things, I think the relationship can quickly improve. I said it quickly improves because the infrastructure for improvement is there; the people are not hostile to each other in the two countries, the governments are. So, the infrastructure of the people is healthy. The market is there, the investment opportunity is there, the economical opportunities are there. All kinds of opportunities for cooperation and coordination of all kinds of stuff are there. So, given a good start, all these potentials can flourish and take over U.S.-Iran relationship and move things on a positive direction towards increasingly better relations.

Finally, I have to say also that the problem between the U.S. and Iran is not just that they don't have relations, that they are not friends; what exists between them is abnormal and they must realize and acknowledge this. See, even nations at war maintain some level of contacts, if not diplomatic relations. In fact, many maintain diplomatic relations. Like during the Cold War, the biggest American embassy was located in Moscow! And where was the biggest Soviet Union embassy located? In Washington! In fact, when two nations have problem with each other, they better to be present at each other's home. So, I think the problem with the U.S.-Iran relationship is that it is abnormal. They have to normalize that relationship, that abnormality, even if the relationship can not be friendly for years. We are not calling for friendship between the U.S. and Iran; we are calling for normalization of relationship. These two concepts are very different from each other. I mean, later, they can decide whether to be friends or not, but they have no choice in

normalizing the relations. The two civilizations have a duty to normalize their relationship.

AG: One question that comes to my mind Dr. Amirahmadi is that what is the rule of intellectuals to generate new options, to imagine new ideas, to lead the policy makers and the leaders? What is their rule here? How can they help?

HA: Intellectuals have significant rule. They can play important rule. Unfortunately, on both sides the intellectual community is bankrupt. Think about this, that most intellectuals in Iran were against U.S.-Iran relationship until recently. During the last 20 years that I have spent on US-Iran relations, only in the last few years I have seen Iranian intellectuals speaking in favor of the relationship; even today not everybody, only a fraction is in favor. That is the irony and the trouble of their stand. This is a disappointment that I continue to have with these so-called intellectuals. I don't believe that these people can really think. I always keep saying to my friends that Iran has what I call lots of politicized intellectuals, but only a few politicians of intellectual capability. The two groups are very different. The point of departure for a politicized intellectual is ideology, theory, ethic, idealism, and the like, while a politician of intellectual capability begins with reality, is pragmatist and a problem-solver. Unfortunately, because Iran does not have enough politicians of intellectual capability, it fails to develop the right and noble ideas needed to resolve the U.S.-Iran conflict.

In the U.S. side, there are many politicians of intellectual capability but many of them have been, in recent years, replaced by a new brand of politicized intellectuals called the neoconservatives, a group of ideological demagogues. The U.S. politicians of both categories are also divided among those who place the American national interests before the interests of its allies and those who think the American interests in the Middle East must be served by serving the vital security interests of American allies such as Israel and certain other states. The pro-American intellectuals are indeed very much in favor of U.S.-Iran relations and they are seriously thinking of using every possibility to engage the two nations. But, the other group is generally obstructionist in this respect and recommends sanctions; some even dream of a U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. It is unfortunate that on both sides we have intellectuals who advocate wars; intellectuals who advocate sanctions; and intellectuals who advocate a continuation of this conflict.

AG: Dr. Amirahmadi, many experts say that a U.S. engagement with Iran will also help the Iranian democratic movements inside that country, which are represented by youth movements in Iran and who are interested to normalize relationship with the United States. What is your opinion on this issue?

HA: That is actually and originally my idea. I have written extensively on that. It is detailed in my article on "*In the Name of the Iranian People: Regime Change or Regime Reform,*" available on my website at www.airahmadi.com.

AG: How does this work? What is the rational behind it?

HA: It is very simple. Let's put it this way. There is not a single country in the world that has been an enemy of the U.S., that has not had relationship with the U.S., and had become democratic. There is not a single country that you can name which has become democratic in the absence of diplomatic relations with the United States of America. This does not mean that if you establish diplomatic relationship with the U.S., you automatically become democratic. It simply means that diplomatic tie with the U.S. is a necessary condition, a pre-condition, for democratic change, though not a sufficient condition. It is a necessary condition because of two reasons. One, in the absence of this relationship, the U.S. does not allow that country to become democratic to begin with, because America sees itself the symbol of democracy worldwide, and it will not allow for a second kind of democratic symbol that is anti-American to emerge. That defeats the American philosophy and purpose. Second, dictators use anti-Americanism to destroy democratic movements in the name of American fifth column, etc. As long as the U.S. and Iran do not have relationship, Iran will never become a democratic nation, as Cuba and North Korea never became democracies. Again, this does not mean that having relationship means automatic democracy, because we don't have it in Egypt or in Saudi Arabia, which have good relations with the U.S.

AG: Dr. Amirahmadi, in another article or yours, *Nuclear Geopolitics in Iran-U.S. Relations: The case for a Big Push toward Confidence Building*, you talk about costly compromises that the two countries need to make. Right now, the assumption is that the current environment does not encourage the politicians in the two countries to make any type of compromises. So the question is what are these compromises and how can we convince the American policy makers and leaders to make them?

HA: Well, the problem is this: the cost of not taking the action, or the cost of inaction, is much higher than the cost of taking action towards peace. In fact, the peace between the U.S. and Iran does have some cost. Both sides need to make compromises and every compromise is costly. But, any compromise for peace is less costly than the status quo or the alternative to peace, which is war. So, the leaders on both sides really have to compare the cost of compromise to the cost of inaction, which means maintaining the status quo or even worse than that is the cost of engaging into a military conflict, which would be devastating. So, if they are to consider logically these alternatives and if they are logical and reasonable people, then they will certainly decide in favor of peace and engagement. I believe any American incentive package for Iran, no matter how large, is less costly than for the Americans to continue with the status quo or engage Iran in a military conflict. Iran's benefit from normalization with the U.S. is equally huge.

AG: You also advocate that the two countries can serve each other in the short term and in the long term. If they really can serve each other's interest, is there a way to influence the leaders and policy makers in the United States? In which way, can we influence them?

HA: The problem is as we influence them for a positive move, the others influence them for a negative one! This is a major problem that we are having and have had. I would

influence the U.S. and Iran to engage, but there were other people with more power, more money, more resources, and more lobby power who would influence them in the exactly opposite direction. Therefore, I would lose after some progress! The biggest problem is the resource problem which leads to the problem of organization, idea, etc. If we want to influence the U.S. and Iran for peace, there have to be people who will put resources in the cause. People who are for war are putting a lot of resources for it. This is unfortunate, but it is true. What I can bring into this game as resource is a fraction of what my competitors bring to this scene for war. They spend millions each year to create hostility and war between the U.S. and Iran, or to maintain the status quo at least. And how much do we have? \$100,000 or \$200,000 each year to make peace! Unfortunately many wealthy Iranians are not used to lobbying, are not used to paying for peace. They can invite 500 people and spend \$50,000 one night, but they will not give \$50 for peace purpose; only a few would. The unfortunate fact is that many of these wealthy Iranians are paying for war between the two nations!

AG: What is the rule of academia Dr. Amirahmadi?

HA: They are really powerless, nothing! I am an academic, but I am very disappointed with them. Academics write for shelves in this particular situation. Unfortunately, the academics have become very irrelevant to the real public policy arena. The public policy has been taken over by people who are not in academia, they are in think tanks, they are in lobby organizations, they are in news agencies, and they are in reporting agencies, in media, newspapers, magazines, and so on. They are not in universities teaching or doing research. Unfortunately, academics are the absolute least powerful people. They have the best ideas, but unfortunately they write their ideas for shelves; completely irrelevant to the practice. The academics have failed to bridge between the practice and theory and have become, therefore, marginalized in the policy arena. There are a good number of academics who have refused to be shelved, but their number is very few. Unfortunately this academic group is not always positive. There are those who advocate war and sanctions and they happen to be very influential. Then, of course, there are academics that are for peace and engagement, but are not influential! The point is that the academics are either on the shelves, un-influential or influential but on the wrong side.

AG: You talked earlier about misperceptions that exist between the two countries, which create a barrier between the two of them. What should be done in order to move beyond these misperceptions, to resolve these misperceptions? How should we deal with this problem in order to explain this misunderstanding to the people?

HA: As I said, the best place to start is the reality and the best people who can do it are the realists. People who are not ideological, people who are pragmatic, people who are open minded, people who really understand the reality as it is, and people who don't have particular agenda and their agenda is only to reflect on the reality. Unfortunately, the so-called experts in US-Iran relations are often people with agenda or have no understanding of the issues involved. Think about it! Most of those who write about Iran in this country, who advise Americans, who are invited to TV and radio shows are people who have never seen Iran, do not know the country's language, and have not studied Iran's history

or culture. Some have become overnight Iran experts after finishing a dissertation or writing a few editorials. What do you expect of these people; their writings to reflect the reality on the ground in Iran? Well! Do not expect that as you will be sure disappointed!

AG: In one of your article you also talk about the importance of dialogue and a discourse of understanding in US-Iran relations...

HA: But they come afterword. Obviously the discourse and dialogue are always the keys. The discourse, such as academic exchange, policy exchange, student exchange, and faculty exchange, are all important. The dialogue is very important too, but again the dialogue has to be based on reality. If you have two persons talking to each other, but they have a wrong view of the reality, they would get nowhere. If these two people do not understand the reality on the ground, then, there is no real dialogue. A real dialogue is based on real understanding, on being realistic, pragmatic, honest, balanced.

AG: Dr. Amirahmadi, you also talk about a “Big Push” approach to confidence building. Why should the package that you are talking about attract Iran to get involved with the U.S.?

HA: I propose a Big Push approach, not as a movement for resolving US-Iran disputes at once but as “shock therapy” that can put a large enough crack in the wall of distrust between the two governments to build confidence and save face on both sides. It is not the same as the so-called “Grand Bargain” approach. The requisite starting point for the Big Push is a change of tone toward a more respectful diplomatic language. This is particularly important for the Iranian side, which considers itself unjustly demonized. The US and Iran must also begin the movement by initiating a concerted diplomatic effort aimed at convincing the many stakeholders in US-Iran relations that their interests will be protected. Next, it is imperative that both sides agree to simultaneously express publically that they are prepared to normalize relations once conditions permit. They will also need to accept to engage in high-level diplomacy without any pre-conditions and with due regard for their respective regional spheres of influence. These initial steps would help establish a new paradigm of US-Iran engagement.

Following these initial confidence-building shock therapy, the US, in partnership with its allies, would offer Iran a considerable and well-publicized incentive package complemented with an equally significant disincentive package that initially remains undisclosed and will be activated only if the reward package were to be rejected by Iran. These big packages, part of a future grand bargain, are originally intangible, that is they are not material offers to be taken but just ideas that need to be implemented in the course of an active and constructive engagement. The main function of the packages is to help set off the Big Push required to establish a US-Iran bilateral dialogue for normalization of relations now that the “no war no peace” status quo cannot be sustained for any longer period. The reward package would at the minimum help remove Iran’s sense of national, regime and energy insecurities, account for Iran’s pride as a great nation, recognize the Islamic system as legitimate and rational, and assist in economic and overall development of the country. Obviously the reward package will not be seriously considered as long as

the US insists on the “use of force as an option of last resort.” Any idea of a war must be removed from the US policy toward Iran.

To satisfy Iran’s pride, the US and its allies should recognize its right and need to enrich uranium within the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as remove Iran’s nuclear dossier from the UN Security Council and return it to the IAEA. Iran’s national security requires that it is securely sheltered from the nuclear bombs in the region and beyond. Iran, isolated, needs to be also protected from the larger nations. The rising Shi’a-Sunni tension rightly concerns Iran. A regional security system along with arrangements that will put a lid on further nuclear weaponization in the region can help with this requirement. In the longer term, the best guarantee will be to make the greater Middle East into a nuclear free zone. Iran’s energy security will require that sanctions on Iran’s oil and gas sector are lifted and that the nation receives international support and technological assistance to develop capabilities for production of nuclear energy in the long-term. The Islamic regime’s security is more complicated in that the immediate threat is external while in the longer term its survival will depend on its ability to reform the theocracy. The US should recognize the Islamic system’s legitimacy, remove the regime from its list of terrorist nations and do away with its regime change policy.

In return, Iran should consent: (1) to halt its enrichment activities for a set period, fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency and ratify its Additional Protocol, and restart its enrichment programs at the end of the specified period or after it reaches an agreement with its nuclear nemesis for a fully verifiable enrichment for civilian use (e.g., forming an international joint-venture on Iranian soil) – whichever comes first; (2) to remove all support for the anti-Israeli and anti-American groups in the region (Iraq and the Occupied Territories included), and officially accept the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; and (3) to allow for free and fair elections in the country beginning with the 2009 Iranian presidential elections. These and other auxiliary compromises that might be demanded from Iran and its nuclear nemesis should be attractive to many of the stakeholders in US-Iran relations. These include Israel, the US, the EU governments, Russia, China, the Arab states, the Iranian people, and the Islamic regime. These are costly compromises for the US and Iran to make but their cost is surely much lower than the cost of the dire alternative: economic sanctions and/or the use of military force.

My only reservation is that I think Iran is more ready than the U.S. for a Big Push approach. In fact, the American foreign policy mind set for conflict resolution is not a Big Push mind set. It is always incremental, slow paced, and a piece-meal mind set. The Iranian mind set for conflict resolution is indeed Big Push. That is to say that they don’t have a stomach for smaller steps, for negotiations, and for going back and forth and so on. Iranians are big picture people. They are not micro people. Iranians are very macro. They talk big. They are general. They are not specific. Yet, Iran and the U.S. have put so much in their baggage of negativity that no peace meal small increments of incentive will ever clean them. Particularly because there are others involved, the minute they start incrementalism, someone out there, no matter how many incremental steps they have taken to mend relations, someone is going to add more problems in the bag. So, to break

through the deadlock, they really need a Big Push. They need to somehow one night get up and say: “Listen, it was all a mistake. We are brothers.” I believe that is how one day the U.S.-Iran conflict will be resolved. The U.S.-Iran conflict will never be resolved in an incremental way. The U.S. and Iran can not have the ping pong diplomacy that the China and the U.S. had. That diplomacy will be a big bang and not a ping pong one.

AG: In another article Dr. Amirahmadi, *The U.S. and Iran Might Clash While We Remain Complacent*, you say the two sides do not want to be seen as the weaker side in a negotiation table. If this is the existing paradigm between the two, how can the two states move beyond this paradigm?

HA: Do you remember my wife-husband problematic? That is the same thing. Nobody wants to be under. I think the U.S. and Iran have to become real about their engagement. At the end of the day, it does not matter who takes the first step or who is seen weak or strong. That becomes irrelevant after the relations starts. In fact, in the future, many may give credit to the guy who starts this process. Indeed, that will be the case. So, I think we just have to tell them to engage. We have to advise them, we have to try to convince them, we have to argue with them, we have to sit and talk with them to engage; that is what I do. I just stay the course and continuously talk to them. Tell them directly or indirectly through media, through interviews or sitting in a room privately. This is what I have been telling them and we will continue telling them as long as it takes.

AG: Do you think Dr. Amirahmadi they can solve the problem and move beyond this wall of mistrust by themselves or do they need a third party as mediator?

HA: Well, always a third party mediator is going to be helpful, but I think neither the U.S. nor Iran have a culture of mediation. Iranian culture is not a mediating culture nor is the American culture. If you go to buy a carpet, you don't take a third party with you to negotiate for you. You just go to the merchant and say you want a carpet and you bargain on the price and you get it, whatever the price is. Americans also dislike mediators in the middle. They have never liked it. They always like to be in charge themselves. Indeed, the U.S. often uses multilateralism to create trouble for its adversaries, while it often uses bilateralism to resolve disputes. So, I don't think a mediator needs to be the case here or ought to be in the middle. While mediation is always a good thing, it will be only helpful on the margin. It will not be in the center of their dialogue. The U.S.-Iran crisis will be basically resolved by the two governments bilaterally with a possible mediator that will stay on the margin, which is good, which is great. The mediator needs to stay on the margin to begin with. This is their job, to stay on the margin and let the real players to get engaged.

AG: And my final question, what are the challenges to a meaningful dialogue and engagement, if you want to sum up all the point that you made. How can they move beyond this wall of mistrust?

HA: To sum up, I think the first thing is that they really have to start talking to each other respectfully. Their tune and their language must be changed and become very

respectful. Iran is a very respectful nation. It is a historic nation with a civilization that is really great. The U.S. is also a civilized and civilizing nation. The modern world cannot be conceived without the contributions that Americans have made to science, technology, and commerce. I think the first thing therefore is for both sides to realize this civilizing nature of the two nations and respect each other and talk to each other respectfully.

Second, I think they have to start with reality. They really have to move away from myths and propaganda. They really have to see where is the real ground; understand each other as they are. They really have to appreciate each other's needs and demands. The U.S. is a superpower that has its own needs and demands. Iran is also a regional power with its own needs and demands. I think this is very critical that each side understands that the other has certain needs and demands to be met.

Third, they also have to understand and accept the fact that this relation has other contenders who need also to gain and not lose from any U.S.-Iran engagement. All involved parties in this relationship need to be assured that the engagement is not going to cost them any thing. I think it is critical for both U.S. and Iran to bring others into their dialogue and speak to them and convince them that they don't need to be worried about a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, that the stakes are too high and the table is too long and every body can take a piece of the big pie on the table. Indeed, unless the US and Iran normalize relations many conflicts in the region including the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts may not be resolved.

Fourth, they must accept that all issues involved in the U.S.-Iran conflict are negotiable. What prevents them from negotiation and reach a resolution is a procedural matter. I think the two sides have to really start thinking about the banality of the procedural dispute; that what really are important are substance and not the procedure. Whether you are on the top or at the bottom is not important; what is important is the action! They have to understand that the substance is important not the form. If they accept this, they can go beyond the present stalemate.

Fifth, they have to acknowledge and understand that this conflict is a spiral one, that the spiral conflict fuels itself unless they break the cycle of the conflict. The fact is, the US-Iran spiral conflict is the most critical fault line in the middle east today, replacing the old Arab-Israeli conflict. They have to intentionally get into this vicious cycle of spiral conflict. That can be done only if both sides decide that they do need each other; that they have to become normal partners again. As the spiral conflict is rooted in misunderstanding and misperceptions, the two sides must do everything to correct them toward removing all mutually demonizing concepts.

Sixth, they also have to understand the very simple fact that they have no right to stand in the middle of the relationships between two great nations; the two great civilized nations. It is not the right of the two governments to do that. The two nations have every right to be engaged, they have every right to have normal relations. This is important. And I think, here people need to speak out; all of them: the intellectuals, the professionals, the business interests, the community leaders, and the ordinary people. They have to speak

out and come to the scene and tell their governments that they just have no right to stand in the middle of the two great nations for normal relations. The general public has to become mobilized, engaged, proactive, demanding, and innovative in this relationship. They should form a strong constituency as the matter cannot be just left to their governments.

AG: Dr. Amirahmadi thank you so much for participating in this conversation. I really appreciate it.

HA: It was my pleasure!