

## **Finding Success in the Middle East: The Need for U.S. Engagement with Iran**

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Why for almost 30 years has the U.S. failed to engage Iran when it plays a central role in establishing a peaceful and stable security order in the Middle East? The simple answer, clearly articulated in the vitriolic rhetoric from American politicians, is that the U.S. despises Iran. Unfortunately, this attitude is a relic of the Cold War era when strategies such as containment and isolation seemed to be effective in controlling revisionist states. Today, these same strategies seem to have little effect. Indeed, American efforts to cast Iran as an international pariah have failed despite a consistent commitment to do so. Considering three decades of failure, continuing on the same path appears futile, stubborn and incompetent. This is particularly true if one considers the ever increasing importance of Middle East stability in winning the wars in Iraq and on terror. If there is to be any chance of success, change in U.S. foreign policy is needed. In short, it is time for the U.S. to take on the diplomatic challenge that is Iran.

Why is Iran a diplomatic challenge? It is because diplomacy represents the only viable path to realizing any shift in Iranian foreign policy. I use diplomacy here in a broad sense, representing a political tool kit that includes direct engagement and mutual recognition of each others' concerns, along with their legitimacy. At present, both sides have failed to do this in any meaningful way, calling out the other for aggressive behavior. For the U.S., this includes Iranian support for Shiia militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and bellicose rhetoric toward Israel. For Iran, it is U.S.-supported efforts at regime change within its borders, military encirclement, and a double standard with respect to Israel and its neighbors. Diplomacy should also include the implementation of other resources, short of military force, to encourage greater cooperation. For the United States, this could include adopting a less threatening military posture, providing incentives for cooperation in Iraq, the war on terrorism, and in the non-proliferation arena. All too often, the U.S. has resorted to threats of retaliation for failure to cooperate, which has tended to exacerbate these issues. For Iran, recognition of U.S. national security interests in Iraq and the Middle East is paramount, in addition to understanding the consequences of instability created by the support of violent groups outside its borders. Such issues can be addressed only through diplomacy, not hollow threats regarding the use of force (i.e. "all options are on the table.").

Talking for sake of talking is not likely to change very much, however. There must be determination on both sides (and the international community) to hold each accountable for their commitments. There also must be time allotted for change, as neither the U.S. nor Iran can re-orient its foreign policy overnight. For the U.S., direct talks are essential for success for at least two reasons. First, working through other countries has been rather ineffective, as most do not view the Iranian regime in the same way, limiting their resolve to pursue change. Second, working through other countries treats Iran as a minor power in a subservient role to the U.S. The reality, however, is that Iran is a regional power that must be treated as such if it is expected to consider cooperation with the U.S. a foreign policy priority. A failure to use direct diplomacy only strengthens the resolve of the Iranian leadership to counter U.S. power and influence in the region.

The arguments for not engaging Iran are weak. It is a government, U.S. policymakers argue, that is despotic, supports terrorism, and seeks to destabilize the Middle East. Thus, the Iranian regime stands against everything the U.S. believes to be important to the future of the Middle East. Any acknowledgment of the regime only affords it legitimacy, while undermining U.S. efforts at security and democratization in the region. Taking these concerns into account, one must still consider whether the long-standing U.S. policies that have sought to ignore, isolate and belittle Iran have done anything to alter Iran's trajectory. Given that Iran is moving to acquire nuclear capabilities, it actually appears that these policies have made things worse. In fact, both Gulf Wars, which eliminated its Iraqi rival, have arguably strengthened Iran's regional power aspirations. What Iran does with this newfound power is still open to influence but only if the United States chooses engagement. Many will argue that this will prove ineffective; Iran will continue to do as it has in the past. While this is a possibility it is far from certain. Continued isolation and indirect diplomacy, however, is certain to not magically work after 30 years of failure.

Unfortunately for the U.S., the Iranian regime does not appear to be short-lived. Like it or not, the only possibility for the U.S. short of war is to pursue direct diplomacy with Iran. After 30 years of isolation and ignorance, there no longer is time to wait if the U.S. wants to achieve success in Iraq and the Global War on Terror, in addition to pursuing a comprehensive Middle East peace. The U.S. must choose engagement if there is to be any chance of altering the behavior of Iran in a way that is more consistent with U.S. goals. There seems little to lose but much to gain by doing so.