



Common Ground News Service - Partners in Humanity

Creating a US-Iran bridge

by Leila Zand

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Washington, DC - The upcoming second round of talks with the United States on Iraq Security offers another opportunity for US-Iranian dialogue and negotiations. However, an atmosphere of mistrust between the United States and Iran persists, leaving open the potential for yet another disastrous conflict in the Middle East.

Ongoing isolation and diplomatic sanctions will not reduce such a possibility. As a result, the question for most of us – both Americans and Iranians – is how can we be influential in determining our countries' future? How can we demand a workable solution, or at least a dialogue, to promote the peaceful co-existence of our two countries?

Because of its geo-political location, Iran is an important power in the troubled region of the Middle East. Iran shares history, culture and religion with two of its neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan, where America has a military presence. In addition, the country has a great deal of control over oil from the Persian Gulf. As such, it could be a welcome partner to the United States in the region.

However, the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979 created a permanent fear of Iran in American minds. For 444 days, every news agency in the east and west carried news of this unlawful act. Though the majority of Iranian citizens disapproved of the hostage taking, their opinions were rarely covered in the media, and neither were the motives that compelled these students to take American hostages. No major media spoke of the connection between this action and that of the American government's in 1953, when the CIA helped overthrow Mohammad Mossadegh, the popularly elected prime minister of Iran. Despite the link, this American fear has continued with the recent development of an Iranian nuclear programme.

After the overthrow of Mossadegh, the United States had a direct hand in Iranian domestic and foreign policy during the time of the late Shah. After 1979, when the Iranian people rose against the Shah, the United States never fully understood the reasons or the consequences and resentment that resulted from its support of the Shah's regime.

If the US government continues to press for more sanctions against Iran and labels the Iranian Revolutionary Guards "terrorists", nothing will change for the better. Furthermore, the United States as a superpower must act fairly with the various countries in the Middle East.

It should engage Iran in the resolution of regional crises, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Iran is a major power in the region with vital influence on anti-Israeli movements in the area. The more Israel, and especially the United States, try to keep Iran away from important decisions in the region, the more Iranians will feel they are ignored.

The United States should also stop supporting grassroots movements in Iran. In recent years, educated Iranian

women have rolled up their sleeves and conducted some of the most impressive grassroots movement in the history of Iran. Alongside women's movement there have been those that have advocated for workers and students' rights.

These groups all say that they don't need outside help. Since the United States has allocated \$75 million to an "Iran Democracy Fund" to support the promotion of democracy in Iran, the life of grassroots movements has become more difficult. Any direct – or indirect – help to the democratic movement in Iran coming from this fund is seen as an attempt of external regime change and prevents Iranian activists and opposition groups from contacting and engaging in dialogue with their American counterparts.

The United States and Iran could, and should, work together on creating a new relationship. Their alliance will help improve the American image in the region, and will pave the path for a more peaceful Middle East. Such an alliance cannot take place with direct military intervention; rather, it must move forward with both parties investing in mutual respect and trust. Iranians must be made to feel that their political, social, and cultural sovereignty is not, and will not be, invaded by such alliance.

Building relations requires continuously striving towards better mutual understanding. The more we accept our differences and the more we respect each other's ways of life, the closer we will be to accomplishing such a goal. The first step can be a mutual agreement to stop using aggressive language and labels like the "Great Satan" and "Axis of Evil". It is then, and only then, that we may understand what "democracy" means to an Iranian, what "freedom" means to an American.

American and Iranian publics need to fill the void left by our diplomats by taking direct action. We need to be informed, engaged and active. We need to become civilian diplomats. This is not a new concept; it has been around since before the Cold War. Civilian diplomats are active when the people believe their government and official diplomats cannot be of significant help in reducing political tensions and re-establishing relations. A civilian diplomat can travel to another country, study the culture and history of the "other" and at least create a civilian bridge between two countries where no other bridge exists.

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