

The Grand Bargain

On April 29, 2007, Nicholas D. Kristof published a column in the New York Times discussing the 2003 “grand bargain” offered by the Iranian government and subsequently rejected by the American administration. Central to this story is American Iranian Council (AIC) founder and president, Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi, who provided Kristof with personal documents detailing the related discussions.

What follows is the editorial by Nicholas Kristof, titled “Diplomacy at its Worst”, a web log entry explaining the background documents in greater details, also published in the New York Times by Kristof, and the actual notes provided by Hooshang Amirahmadi to inform Kristof’s column.

For nearly a decade, the American Iranian Council has been central to the relationship between the United States and Iran. Among the Council's successes is the March 17, 2000 speech by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Her speech is widely viewed within policy circles as a breakthrough in US diplomacy.

Lesser known is the role of the American Iranian Council and Hooshang Amirahmadi in providing a platform between 2002 and 2003, for discussions directly related to a resumption of peaceful relations. Thus, at this critical time in US-Iranian relations, when talk of discussions is being considered, it is important to examine the missed opportunities and make every effort not to repeat the same course of events.

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Diplomacy at its Worst

Nicholas D. Kristof
New York Times
April 29, 2007

In May 2003, Iran sent a secret proposal to the U.S. for settling our mutual disputes in a “grand bargain.”

It is an astonishing document, for it tries to address a range of U.S. concerns about nuclear weapons, terrorism and Iraq. I’ve placed it and related documents (including multiple drafts of it) on my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground.

Hard-liners in the Bush administration killed discussions of a deal, and interviews with key players suggest that was an appalling mistake. There was a real hope for peace; now there is a real danger of war.

Scattered reports of the Iranian proposal have emerged previously, but if you read the full documentary record you’ll see that what the hard-liners killed wasn’t just one faxed Iranian proposal but an entire peace process. The record indicates that officials from the repressive, duplicitous government of Iran pursued peace more energetically and diplomatically than senior Bush administration officials — which makes me ache for my country.

The process began with Afghanistan in 2001-2. Iran and the U.S., both opponents of the Taliban, cooperated closely in stabilizing Afghanistan and providing aid, and unofficial “track two” processes grew to explore opportunities for improved relations.

On the U.S. side, track two involved well-connected former U.S. ambassadors, including Thomas Pickering, Frank Wisner and Nicholas Platt. The Iranian ambassador to the U.N., Javad Zarif, was a central player, as was an Iranian-American professor at Rutgers, Hooshang Amirahmadi, who heads a friendship group called the American Iranian Council.

At a dinner the council sponsored for its board at Ambassador Zarif’s home in September 2002, the group met Iran’s foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi. According to the notes of Professor Amirahmadi, the foreign minister told the group, “Yes, we are ready to normalize relations,” provided the U.S. made the first move.

This was shaping into a historic opportunity to heal U.S.-Iranian relations, and the track two participants discussed further steps, including joint U.S.-Iranian cooperation against Saddam Hussein. The State Department and National Security Council were fully briefed, and in 2003 Ambassador Zarif met with two U.S. officials, Ryan Crocker and Zalmay Khalilzad, in a series of meetings in Paris and Geneva.

Encouraged, Iran transmitted its “grand bargain” proposals to the U.S. One version was apparently a paraphrase by the Swiss ambassador in Tehran; that was published this year in The Washington Post.

But Iran also sent its own master text of the proposal to the State Department and, through an intermediary, to the White House. I've also posted that document, which Iran regards as the definitive one.

In the master document, Iran talks about ensuring "full transparency" and other measures to assure the U.S. that it will not develop nuclear weapons. Iran offers "active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization." Iran also contemplates an end to "any material support to Palestinian opposition groups" while pressuring Hamas "to stop violent actions against civilians within" Israel (though not the occupied territories). Iran would support the transition of Hezbollah to be a "mere political organization within Lebanon" and endorse the Saudi initiative calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Iran also demanded a lot, including "mutual respect," abolition of sanctions, access to peaceful nuclear technology and a U.S. statement that Iran did not belong in the "axis of evil." Many crucial issues, including verification of Iran's nuclear program, needed to be hammered out. It's not clear to me that a grand bargain was reachable, but it was definitely worth pursuing — and still is today.

Instead, Bush administration hard-liners aborted the process. Another round of talks had been scheduled for Geneva, and Ambassador Zarif showed up — but not the U.S. side. That undermined Iranian moderates.

A U.S.-Iranian rapprochement could have saved lives in Iraq, isolated Palestinian terrorists and encouraged civil society groups in Iran. But instead the U.S. hard-liners chose to hammer plowshares into swords.

www.nytimes.com/ontheground.

Iran's Proposal for a 'Grand Bargain'

Nicholas D. Kristof
New York Times
April 28, 2007

In Sunday's column I lay out the attempts to reach a "grand bargain" between the U.S. and Iran, before Bush administration hard-liners killed the effort in 2003. Here I'm providing more background and the full documents.

The most crucial documents are the Iranian proposals for a "grand bargain" with the U.S. Iran apparently was partly reassured by the bustle of diplomacy in 2001-2003, while also nervous at what it saw as U.S. swagger into Iraq and Afghanistan – and taken aback by President Bush's hostility to Tehran, as reflected in Iran's selection for the "axis of evil."

[This document](#) is the original draft version of the "grand bargain," but its parentage is uncertain. For political reasons, doves in both the U.S. and in Iran prefer to present the grand bargain idea as originating on the other side, for neither wants to signal any political weakness. So this document arrived in the Iranian Foreign Ministry and purported to come from the U.S.; it was described as a U.S. initiative, but I can't find anyone in the U.S. who acknowledges having prepared it. In any case, this was the starting point.

Then Ambassador Zarif edited it – his changes are in red in [this document](#), and this is the one I would strongly encourage you to read. It was approved as the master statement of the Iranian position. Iran faxed it to the State Department and sent it, through an intermediary, to the White House. [Here's](#) a final, clean version, as it was transmitted.

I can't verify that the Iranian versions were received, or at least reviewed by senior officials. The Bush administration instead seemed to focus on a two-page document that came from the Swiss ambassador to Iran at the time, who looked after American interests there. That was a cover letter and a paraphrase of the Iranian documents cited above. These documents from the Swiss ambassador are what American officials received on May 4, 2003, and which they then rejected. Indeed, the Swiss ambassador was even reprimanded for having the temerity to forward the proposal. The Swiss document [was published earlier this year](#) on the Washington Post website with [an article](#) by Glenn Kessler; the Iranians' position is that the real proposal is the one they prepared and transmitted, not the Swiss paraphrase.

These proposals were an outgrowth of a burst of diplomacy, both official and unofficial, in the fall of 2001 as the U.S. and Iran cooperated against their mutual enemy, the Taliban. For background, [here](#) is a partial chronology prepared by Hooshang Amirahmadi, head of the American Iranian Council.

The unofficial diplomacy got a boost at two meetings at the home of Ambassador Zarif in September 2002, for board members of the American Iranian Council. Mr. Amirahmadi's notes show that at the first meeting, Tom Pickering – a veteran U.S. ambassador – said that he had just spoken with the State Department and was told that the Bush administration was prepared to normalize relations in some circumstances. Others at the meeting whom I spoke to don't particularly remember that, one way or the other. Mr. Pickering himself says he doesn't

remember it, or whom he might have spoken to in the State Department, but he says that if it is in the notes he doesn't contest it.

At a follow-up meeting at Mr. Zarif's home, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi met with many of the same people. Mr. Amirahmadi's notes indicate that initially Mr. Kharrazi was not encouraging but finally said in response to a question:

"Yes! We are ready to normalize relations" with the US and prepared to discuss problems that exist between us, but for that to happen we must be able to trust the US and this requires some initial positive gestures in the part of Washington, particularly a change in tone.

In the months afterward, there were further discussions about how to proceed to nurture improved U.S.-Iranian relations. One proposal was for a conference at which each would publicly discuss normalization; [another](#) was for cooperation against Saddam Hussein. By all accounts, the State Department and National Security Council were fully briefed through this period, but different participants disagree about how much of a blessing the State Department gave the process. One participant said it had enough approval that it was in effect "track one-and-a-half," while another participant said he didn't see much Bush administration support at all. To add to the confusion, there were several track-two processes going on at the same time, and they were not all fully briefed on the others. [Here](#) is a memo that Mr. Amirahmadi wrote to himself in November 2002, incorporating his meeting notes and describing the events of that fall as he saw them.

When the Neo-cons killed the incipient peace process, they did so partly on the basis that Iran had been uncooperative on terrorism. At a meeting in Geneva on terrorism issues, Zalmay Khalilzad had told Ambassador Zarif that the U.S. had information of a forthcoming terror bombing in the Gulf area. Mr. Khalilzad reportedly asked Iran to interrogate Al Qaeda members in Iranian prisons for information about the incident. Iran apparently dropped the ball (it says it didn't have enough information) and did not generate any useful intelligence, and the incident turned out to be a suicide truck bombing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 12, 2003.

As I wrote in my column, I'm not sure that the diplomacy would have led to a "grand bargain" — there would have been very tough negotiating ahead. But the Iranian proposal was promising and certainly should have been followed up. It seems diplomatic mismanagement of the highest order for the Bush administration to have rejected that process out of hand, and now to be instead beating the drums of war and considering air strikes on Iranian nuclear sites.

The moderate camp in Iran was discouraged and discredited when the U.S. rejected its "grand bargain" proposal. But there is still a chance that Iran's May 2003 proposal could be revived as a basis for new talks that aim for normalizing U.S.-Iranian relations. And if there isn't room for a "grand bargain," there may at least be an opportunity for a mini-bargain. Condi Rice seems more willing to negotiate with Iran than other principals in the administration, so let's hope she pursues this path.

Personal Memo of Hooshang Amirahmadi, Ph.D.

Confidential

June 2004

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(**Note:** this memo was prepared on the basis of my notes throughout the 2001-2004 when a group of us at AIC were heavily involved in establishing dialogue and improving relations between the US and Iran. Certain items were included in the memo most recently after extensive discussions with a high-ranking Iranian official).

The Chronology of the Grand Bargain Initiative (2001-2004)

1. **October or November 2001:** The US proposes to Iran that they should directly negotiate over Iraq within the Committee set out for Afghanistan. The proposal was received through the Swiss Embassy or during the negotiations over Afghanistan within the Afghan Committee (this American proposal was followed by the Axis of Evil speech in January 2002).
2. **February 2002:** Iran makes a counterproposal for direct negotiations over Iraq within the framework of 5+6 (five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria). The proposal was sent to the State Department via the UN Secretary-General, Mr. **Kofi Anan**. The US rejected the idea because they did not want to involve Russia and China in the negotiations. **Thomas Pickering** and **Brent Scowcroft** had tried to convince Ambassador **Javad Zarif** to prepare Iran for the American proposal.
3. **March 2002:** **AIC** organized a major event in Washington that brought Senators **Joe Biden**, **Chuck Hagel**, **Robert Torricelli**, and **Zalmy Khalilzad**. Senator Biden made the proposal that a congressional delegation go to Tehran and meet its counterpart in Tehran.
4. **September 2002:** A select number of AIC Boards meet Ambassador Zarif at his residence (including, **Tom Pickering**, **Frank Wisner**, **Hooshang Amirahmadi**, and **Richard Murphy**). Zarif had just arrived from Tehran as Iran's new Ambassador. Significantly, Ambassador Pickering reported that before he comes to the meeting he spoke to the State Department and was told that the **US is prepared to normalize relations with Iran**. It was agreed that AIC organizes a conference where the two sides will come and simultaneously announce their intention to normalize relations (see Memo to Myself).
5. **September 2002:** A select group of AIC Board members meet Iran's Foreign Minister, **Dr. Kamal Kharrazi**, at the residence of Dr. Zarif. It was at this meeting that Iran,

through its Foreign Minister, for the first time, expressed that it **wants to normalize relations** with the US. Till then, Iran had only spoken about normalization of the **conditions** for negotiations. The expression was like a bomb drop for all of us. Ambassador **Pickering delivered that message to the State Department.**

6. **October 2002:** We developed a proposal for US-Iran Cooperation over Iraq. I then met **Zalmy Khalilzad** in his NSC office in the White House to convey the normalization desire of Iran, our plan to hold a conference for simultaneous expression of intentions to normalize (see Memo to Myself), and the proposal for cooperation on Iraq (see Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq).
7. **September-November 2002:** I met **Ryan Crocker** and others in State Department. Exchanged views and information about what might be done to engage the two sides. Pickering was the main contact with the Department. His main contact was Ambassador **Bill Burns**, the third ranking official at the Department. He was to convince Mr. Burns to participate in our proposed event, along with Dr. Zarif, for the simultaneous expression of the two countries' desire to normalize.
8. **January 2003:** Ambassador Zarif meets Ambassador **Ryan Crocker** (of the State Department) in Paris. They discuss ways that the two governments could cooperate over Iraq. AIC had already prepared a proposal for US-Iran cooperation on Iraq (see Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq). Meanwhile, the US was preparing for the war against Saddam Hussein.
9. **March 2003, April:** Ambassador Zarif meets **Zalmy Khalilzad** (a director of the National Security Council) and Ryan Crocker in Geneva. They discuss cooperation on Iraq. The US is now very close to invading Iraq. Dr. Zarif had tried to explain to Ambassador **Khalilzad** what could happen after the US invades Iraq (warned him of the post-Saddam problems).
10. **March 20, 2003:** The US officially invade Iraq. Saddam Hussein is overthrown.
11. **May 1, 2003:** Per Zarif, Iran's FM receives a "proposal from the State Department. Zarif is in Tehran and uses the opportunity to modify the Iran side of the proposal. (**Wilkerson** – Colin Powell's Chief of Staff -- is said to have noted that the said proposal was very similar to one being circulated in the State Department at the time, and Undersecretary **Richard Armitage** is quoted as saying he had seen the proposal but thought it reflected the wishes of the Swiss Ambassador more than the positions of Iran or the US -- per Maziar Bahari and Seymour Hirsch in Newsweek.
12. **May 3, 2003:** Ambassador Zarif meets Ambassador Zalmy Khalilzad and Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Geneva. The US delegation is headed by Dr. Khalilzad. The US has already invaded Iraq and is in control of its Government. The situation begins to deteriorate in Iraq along the line predicted by Zarif. During this meeting, Khalilzad tells Zarif that the US has learned that a terrorist bombing incident is planned to happen in the Persian Gulf area. He asks that Iranian Government utilize members of Al-Qaeda in Iranian prisons for information on the planned incident. The incident happened on May 12 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

13. **May 4, 2003:** The Grand Bargain proposal is faxed to the US Government. **On May 4,** Tim Guldemann, the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran, authenticates the proposal.
14. **May 12, 2003:** Immediately after the bombing in Saudi Arabia, the US accused Iran of complicity with the terrorists (unfortunately, Iran had not taken the US information seriously and had not followed the request that it uses imprisoned Al-Qaeda operatives to get information for the US).
15. **May 24, 2003:** The planned meeting between Zarif and Khalilzad did not take place. Zarif went to Geneva for the meeting but Khalilzad did not show up. In Zarif's view, the neocons have orchestrated the accusation against Iran so that they could derail Zarif-Khalilzad negotiations. They succeeded. After the Zarif-Khalilzad meetings ended, the accusations also stopped! (Note, as per Zarif, while he was meeting Khalilzad, neo-cons were sending him message asking that he should talk to them (he named Richard Pearl in particular – who was at the time Chairman of the Defense Policy Board in the Pentagon).
16. **January 2004:** I interview Dr. Zarif and expected to interview Armitage or Burns as well for response to Zarif's statements. But they did not respond and we had to settle with an interview with Ambassador Pickering. Those interviews were published in the *AIC Insight* (no. 1 and 2, March 2004 and September 2004). The publication is posted on the Council's website: www.american-iranian.org (under Publications). Zarif's views, as expressed in the interview in some detail, were already put in the Grand Bargain proposal that had been prepared on the basis of our activities as described above.

Personal Memo of Hooshang Amirahmadi, Ph.D.

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A Proposal for US-Iran Cooperation against Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hossein, just like Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, is a sworn enemy of both Iran and the United States. Yet, the two countries have not arrived at a consensus on assessing Iraqi threats or to an agreement in dealing with Saddam Hussein. This is largely due to a lack of direct and authoritative communication between Washington and Tehran. Considering the increasing chance of a war with Iraq, their cooperation on strategic issue of Iraq is necessary and possible and would be in their best interests.

The Islamic Republic has expressed its receptiveness to coordinated measures to abate the costs and risks of counteracting with Iraqi threats and of the post Saddam Hussein situation. The Bush administration has also indicated interest. Managed properly, well-communicated and coordinated actions to address Iraqi threats would reduce misunderstanding and provide another window of opportunity for official interactions toward mending Iran-U.S. relations.

For this to happen, both sides must help open the window and open it wide. This will be neither easy nor risk free, but it is certainly possible as happened during the US war in Afghanistan. This time, however, the cooperation should be constructed in such a way that the window would not close after the Iraqi crisis is over as, again, happened in the Afghan case. The key to a more lasting partnership is careful attention to the realities on both sides and in the region.

The United States and Iran have been unfriendly since the revolution in 1979. The memories and issues involved are for the most part historical, bitter, and complex, including mutual distrust, suspicion, perceived threats, and the uncertainty of reciprocity. Worst yet, extremists in Tehran want to join forces with Iraq to prevent their anticipated harm by the United States. Opposed to US-Iran cooperation are also powerful interests in Washington, the Middle East, and beyond.

As the experience of collaboration over Afghanistan demonstrated, a lasting cooperation between the two governments must account for the influence of these powerful forces. Their concerns cannot and should not be overlooked. A measured and limited cooperation will allow time for these forces to adjust and taste the fruits of cooperation. Washington and Tehran must also consider the high possibility of an Iraqi extreme reaction to US-Iran coordination. One way to address this problem would be to take a low profile and act in the context of the United Nations.

The United States and Iran should not expect to resolve their contending issues with this proposed cooperation. But, it is indispensable for the gradual process of building trust and

mutual respect with public support. It is important to account for the needs of the states, and the concerns of the third parties, but it is even more significant to consider the demands of the people. For the Iranians, democracy and respect for human rights are among such uncompromising demands.

The following two lists are prepared with this state of affairs in mind. They are hoped to provide the basis for an honest negotiation between Washington and Tehran to arrive at a definitive understanding on how to cooperate over Iraq before, during and after the expected war. That war is hoped to take place with the UN consent, involving no direct Israeli intervention, must change the current Iraqi regime, and establish a more representative government in Baghdad.

Things Iran Should Do for the United States

In considering this list, Iran must weigh the cost of its inaction including the consequences that can follow from an American victory in Iraq, and the fact that normalization of relations is in the best interest of Iran.

- Establish a hotline of communication with the United States to exchange information and prevent misunderstanding
- Not cooperate with Iraq during the war
- Not use oil as a weapon
- Prepare Iranian hospitals in the vicinity for receiving Americans wounded by Iraqi chemical/biological weapons
- Allow the emergency trespassing of American warplanes in Iranian air space and their landing on Iranian soil, and provide humanitarian assistance to their crew.
- Receive war refugees and arrange for their camping inside Iraqi territories or Iranian soil depending on circumstances
- Close all Iranian borders to fleeing Iraqi Ba'ath Party members and military personnel, or terrorists
- Lift all restrictions on groups inside or outside of Iran who wish to fight Saddam Hussein's arm forces.
- Provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi civilians hurt or displaced by the war
- Prevent Iraqi military forces from using any Iranian borders, waters or air spaces
- Assist the United States in forming a representative and stable post-Saddam Hussein government (as in the case of Afghanistan)
- Not demand the immediate return of the war refugees till the new government in Baghdad is stable
- Not cooperate with anti-American military forces after the war, and help to destroy them
- Iran will provide evidence for charging Saddam Hussein and members of his inner circle with crimes against humanity in the case he is toppled
- Iran will use the cooperation over Iraq to engage with the US for more open direct bilateral talks to address US' broader concerns with terrorism, proliferation of WMD, Middle East peace, and human rights.

Things the United States Should Do for Iran

In considering this list, the United States needs to appreciate the fact that the status quo in Iraq is more anti-American than anti-Iran, Iraq is a much more difficult case than Afghanistan, Tehran will be taking a great risk for the cooperation, and that normalization of relations with Iran is in Washington's best interest.

- Express intention to normalize relations with Iran and change its tone and actions to reflect that expressed will
- Extend to Iran the same protection extended to other regional allies against possible Iraqi biological and chemical attacks
- Free the frozen Iranian assets (against purchase of say civilian jets or other similarly significant civilian products)
- Partially lift sanctions in selected areas, including Iranian energy sector
- Drop American opposition to Iran's membership in WTO and Asia Development Bank as well as Iran's loan applications to the IMF and the World Bank
- Acknowledge Iran's legitimate national security concerns and its rights to provide for its defensive means
- Guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq
- Take measures to reduce the American military presence in the region after the war

Personal Memo of Hooshang Amirahmadi, Ph.D.

Confidential
November 2002

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**Meetings with Dr. Zarif, Dr. Kharrazi, NSC
and State Department Staff**

Meeting with Dr. Javad Zarif, September 2002

Two major developments made us, in AIC, think that perhaps a new window of opportunity might be opened in US-Iran relations; First is the appointment of Dr. Javad Zarif as Iran's new Ambassador to the UN, replacing Mr. Hadi Nejad-Housseinian. Dr. Zarif is considered both more liberal and better informed about the legal problems facing Iran globally and in relation to the United States. Americans also know Dr. Zarif well as they have worked with him in many occasions including in Bonn, Germany, when the two nations discussed the formation of the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The other development is the growing tension between Iraq and the United States. Saddam Hussein happens to be inimical to both Tehran and Washington. An opportunity for cooperation then exists for both sides to exploit.

With these and other understandings in mind, I proposed that Dr. Zarif and a small number of AIC Board of Directors meet. That meeting took place in September 2002 at the Ambassador's residence. Present were Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Ambassador Frank Wisner, Ambassador Nick Platt, Ambassador Bill Miller, Ambassador Richard Murphy, Mr. Hassan Nemazee, and Professor Hooshang Amirahmadi. The discussion focused on US-Iran relations. Dr. Zarif made most of the talking. He described the various tendencies among the Iranian religious elite vis a vis the United States.

There are those who dogmatically oppose any relations with the United States; the Leader, who is not ideological about relations with the US, strongly believes that the relations will not serve Iran's best interest; and those who wish to interact with the US but have serious concerns. These include imbalance in power between the two governments. Iran's power centered on its rhetoric but that has been largely withdrawn in recent years. In sharp contrast, the US has all the leverage of power in its side and yet has advanced more rhetoric in recent years, the last of which was the "axis of evil." Adding this to the bad intention of the US toward the regime in Tehran, you get the distrust that is so deep and thick in US-Iran relations.

Aside from the problem with rhetoric, Washington often responds negatively to Iran's gestures of goodwill. The Afghan case is a recent example. Iran helped the US and was expecting rewards, but instead Tehran became evil. He gave several other examples of Iran's goodwill gestures, including the signals Tehran has been sending regarding a possible US-Iran cooperation on ousting Saddam Hussein (e.g., sending Ayatollah Hakim's son to Washington with Iranian diplomatic passport). This lack of positive response, Dr. Zarif think, is due to strong

anti-Iran lobby organizations in the United States. He concluded by saying that he is ready to take steps that can be sustained toward an eventual dialogue.

Ambassador Murphy reminded Dr. Zarif that while Israeli lobbies are powerful, part of the complain about Iran comes directly from Israel and by the leadership in Tel Aviv. Ambassador Miller reminded Ambassador Zarif that Iran has not been speaking in one authoritative voice and has not taken on a few major congressional initiatives including one offered by Senator Joe Biden at AIC's March 2002 conference. Dr. Zarif reported that he has just met a Senator from Arkansas and that he intends to meet more Congressmen and Senators in the coming months. Mr. Nemazee cautioned that if Iran was to remain oblivious to the dangerous situation that exists, Iran could in the future become another Iraq. Then all doors will be closed. Dr. Zarif responded that he was also concerned about such an eventuality and said that Iran does not intend to provide any pretext to the US for that to happen. Supporting Hassan's position, I commented that such an eventually, that is the Iraqization of Iran, is the next natural step in the evolution of US-Iran relations unless Washington and Tehran take serious steps soon toward mending relations.

Ambassadors Pickering, Wisner and Platt all asked questions and made comments. Mr. Wisner was more interested in substantive talks between the two governments and did not think that formalities mattered much. This he said requires that Iran and the US accept to negotiate on substantive issues of concern, issues that both sides see central to their immediate national interests. Ambassador Pickering asked if Iran was indeed ready to normalize relations with the US. Dr. Zarif responded by saying that no decision has been made to normalize relations with the US but added emphatically that Iran has not also made a decision not to have normal relations with the US, implying diplomatically, that normalization was an option and that Iran is not against it. Tom reported that before he comes to the meeting, he spoke to the State Department and was told that the Bush administration is prepared to normalize and discuss ways of arriving at such an eventuality.

Tom then put the main proposal of the night on the table. For the US and Iran to work and normalize relations, three things need to happen: one, they must accept and decide to normalize relations (political will); two, they must find the right approach to come together; and three, they must focus on substantive issues requiring immediate attention. Political will, a road map, and a prioritized list of key issues. These are the key requirements. Dr. Zarif did not object to this strategy but said that for the first to happen in Iran's side, the US must show some degree of good intention. I suggested that the US publicly state that it wishes to normalize relations with Iran, to which Iran needs to publicly and positively respond. These announcements can be coordinated to take place simultaneously at an AIC forum. With those positions in the open, then the two sides can negotiate for establishing diplomatic ties and resolving disputes between them.

More discussions followed but no new ideas were advanced and the meeting was adjourned with a positive and productive tone on Dr. Zarif's part: "with your assistance, we hope to make advances and I am ready to work with you on that." We decided to continue the discussion while Iran and the US will use their other channels (including the Swiss Embassy in Tehran) to communicate and send messages back and forth.

Meeting with FM Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, September 2002

This dinner meeting, organized by AIC, was held in the same residence and among the participants five were from the previous meeting with Dr. Zarif: Ambassadors Pickering, Platt, Wisner, Miller and I. Two US senators had their people sitting at the table as well (Senators Biden and Senator Hagel). I was the only non-official Iranian-American present. Ten guests were invited to have dinner with the Minister. Dr. Kharrazi conducted much of the discussion, and he focused on many negative experiences with the US, focusing on several Iranian gestures and American negative responses. The discussions and questions that were put to the FM were similar to ones that came out in the previous meeting.

Initially, he seemed to suggest that there was no hope! It was toward the end of the meeting that all changed. After hearing such negative views, I asked if the Minister had anything positive to say, and asked a pointed question: "Dr. Kharrazi, please tell us in clearest possible language if Iran wishes to normalize relations with the US." He stayed quiet for a while and then responded: "Yes! We are ready to normalize relations" with the US and prepared to discuss problems that exist between us, but for that to happen we must be able to trust the US and this requires some initial positive gestures in the part of Washington, particularly a change in tone.

The FM had dropped a bombshell, the audience thought! Never before Iran had said so explicitly that it wanted to normalize RELATIONS with the US. Iran had always insisted that they were for the normalization of the CONDITIONS for a dialogue. The group changed mood and left happy that night. I stayed behind to discuss the matter further with the Minister and Ambassador Zarif. During our long discussion that night through the early morning, we begin to formulate a proposal. It will call for an AIC conference at which the two sides will read a coordinated statement. That statement will unequivocally express the wishes of the two governments to normalize relations and on that basis would be ready to negotiate for establishing diplomatic ties and resolution of their disputes. Others will also speak at the conference, which will focus on "reframing regional security" including a panel on Iraq. I insisted that the FM agrees to the proposal. He was initially non-committal but said I shall work on that with Dr. Zarif, which we did in a subsequent meeting. The next few days after the proposal was better prepared, I shared the idea with Ambassador Pickering. He made corrective suggestions and his comments were also included in the final idea. Later that week I took the proposal to NSC and Tom to his contact in the State Department.

Meeting in NSC and Discussions with Directors, September and October 2002

I meet Dr. Zalmeh Khalilzad, Special Assistant to the President Bush, in his office in NSC. Present was Hillary Mann, NSC Director for Iran and Iraq. We spent about two hours to discuss the meetings with Drs. Zarif and Kharrazi, the proposal I had developed, and the many aspects of US-Iran relations, including political reform and human rights in Iran. Again, the proposal will call for a conference organized by AIC at which officials from the US and Iran will read a statement previously coordinated between them. The statements should convey the message that the two nations are prepared to normalize relations, and are ready to negotiate toward establishing diplomatic ties and resolution of disputes. Zal asked if the Supreme Leader had approved this. I replied no and emphasized that this was AIC proposal, prepared with the consent of Dr. Zarif and his direct boss. But I also emphatically stated that, knowing Dr. Kharrazi, I do not believe he would have made any new gesture of such magnitude without the knowledge and consent of the Leader. I was referring to the statement by the FM in September meeting in which he said Tehran was ready to normalize relations if conditions permitted.

At the conclusion of that meeting, Dr. Khalilzad told me that "in principle, there is no problem with the proposal," but he must consult with his superiors before a definitive answer is given. He asked for a few days. I asked him to also speak to Ambassador Pickering, which he subsequently did. Per Tom's report to me, he was positively inclined toward our proposal. At the conclusion of my meeting with Zal and Hillary, I begged them to make sure that no compromises is made with Iran over political reform and human rights. I explicitly made them know that these two issues were central to AIC's concern in any negotiations between the two governments. After several phone conversations between me and Zalmy, he then offered to meet D. Zarif. That proposal is now on the table for Tehran to take. Dr. Zarif 's immediate reaction to that proposal was that it was not new and that the US does not seem to be prepared for a fresh new approach. I must emphasize that NSC has not rejected our proposal and that in two weeks we might hear from Zal with some better news! Meanwhile we hope that the meeting between Drs. Zarif and Khalilzad will take place and soon [Note: The two later met – see the Grand Bargain Chronology).

Discussions with the State Department, September and October 2002

The proposal was also shared with the State Department. Tom took the main responsibility for that track. We frequently met and spoke by telephone to coordinate various messages. In the process the State Department proposed that the US and Iran cooperate on Iraq but that US-Iran issues be also included. In another productive meeting between Dr. Zarif and me, he accepted the proposal but cautioned that his approval is conditioned on official acceptance by Tehran, and that its implementation will depend on official acceptance of the idea by the US as well. No specific public statement will be made on the nature of the cooperation over Iraq, which shall remain low profile due to sensitivities involved. We expect to hold a conference where the two sides will come and talk about Iraq in the larger context of regional security. The parties will share lectures 48 hours in advance and they hope to have their official statements "proportionally positive."

While this is not the same as our previous proposal, it is fairly close to it and as a first step will open the road for subsequent discussions for normalization. To facilitate the dialogue on Iraq, I have prepared a statement including two lists of "things" that the two sides might consider doing for each other as the US goes to war with Iraq. The statement is sent to Tom for review and change from an American perspective. After we have finalized the statement in our side, we will forward it to the two sides as a possible basis for discussion and hopefully cooperation. Let us hope that this will be the case! It is important to emphasize at the end that the list of "things" we propose is ours, and that it does not reflect positions on either side.

MORE TO COME!

[See the grand bargain Chronology and the Proposal for US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq].

Reference Materials

The original articles and supporting documentation, used to inform Nicholas Kristof's column, are available at the New York Times website.

<http://select.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/opinion/29kristof.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/ontheground>

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