

## ARGUMENT

# Iran and the United States Can be Friends

They almost were, and now Hassan Rouhani could help get things back on track.

BY ALEX VATANKA | NOVEMBER 28, 2018, 11:02 AM

On Nov. 4, Iran commemorated the 39th anniversary of the day some 400 militant Islamist students seized the U.S. Embassy in downtown Tehran. The United States marked the date, too: On Nov. 5, it imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran, which President Donald Trump's administration has termed part of a "maximum pressure" campaign to bring the country back to the negotiating table.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif quickly responded with a video message in which he told Trump to "dream on." Zarif mused that Trump, like his six presidential predecessors whose main policy toward Iran was "bravado," will see his efforts Tehran fail. And yet, whispers in Tehran about the need to break the stalemate and talk to Trump are becoming louder.

Even if negotiating with Trump is impossible—and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has said it is—the leadership in Tehran can still look at his presidency as an opportunity to prepare the ground to talk to his successor. As Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has put it, America is much bigger than just Trump. He's right, and it will fall to the rest of the Iranian leadership to soberly admit to this reality and ease its demonization of the United States. If that sounds implausible, Tehran need only to look back to the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979. It was in those early days that the question of relations with Washington almost by chance became contentious.

**There's some irony in the way Zarif responded to the sanctions. On the one hand, Iranian officials bemoan Washington's bravado and alleged Iranophobia. And yet, since 1979, Iranian political orthodoxy has been Americaphobic on a grand scale.**

Top figures such as Rouhani or Zarif who dare question this orthodoxy face severe censure from inside the regime. When Rouhani was in New York in September to attend the United Nations General Assembly, his entourage went to great lengths to avoid even an accidental meeting between Rouhani and Trump. It was likewise clear from

Rouhani's Sept. 25 U.N. speech that he was fixed on one thing only: reassuring his hard-line rivals in Tehran that he had no intention of courting an American president whose administration has put forward a list of 12 concessions Tehran would have to make before sanctions can be removed.

Khamenei will never agree to those concessions as long as he surrounds himself with the generals from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose livelihoods are most at stake should Tehran opt for any kind of reconciliation with Washington. And yet, Tehran knows beyond a doubt the serious costs that come with a hostile relationship with the United States. In fact, the last 40 years is littered with examples to prove this point.

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## **Tehran knows beyond a doubt the serious costs that come with a hostile relationship with the United States.**

Rouhani—understanding both pressures—is looking for ways to take the America issue off the table. Rather than blaming the United States for the poor state of relations between the two countries, he has called on Trump not to be misled by the Israelis, the Saudis, and the Iranian opposition in exile. The subtext is clear: Third-party actors are spoiling relations between Tehran and Washington. It might seem like a cop-out, and it is, but it is also an overture of sorts. In fact, Rouhani and other first-generation Islamist revolutionary leaders who are guilty of having deliberately manufactured an American boogeyman are best placed to start looking for ways to break this spell.

**If Trump, as in Rouhani's telling, is simply guilty of gullibility when it comes to Iran, the regime in Tehran is guilty of something worse: spreading the historical myth that, from day one, the United States was opposed to the Islamic Republic.** When Zarif, a purported moderate, speaks of 40 years of American hostility against Iran, it sounds as if Washington's policies toward Iran's Islamists were crafted in vacuum from the moment the republic was born. The reality is something different.

From the first signs that the shah's regime was about to be toppled in 1979, Washington looked for ways to work with those it supposed would become Iran's new rulers. Its main goal was to protect broader U.S. interests in a vital region at the height of the Cold War. At one point soon after the revolution, Cyrus Vance, then the U.S. secretary of state, even came to view Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the best safeguard against a

communist takeover in Tehran. He raised the possibility of close cooperation between the new regime and Washington. Vance may have been clueless about the worldview of the Khomeini circle, yet he was going by messages he was receiving from the cleric's key deputies. Khomeini's advisors told the Americans that the ayatollah would be open to U.S. investment but would be generally antagonistic toward the West. He would be even more antagonistic to the "atheist" and "anti-religious Soviets," though.

At first, the Khomeinists showed no interest in an open confrontation with the United States. When on Feb. 15, 1979, a group of radical leftist gunmen stormed the U.S. Embassy, it was an armed rescue squad dispatched by Khomeini that ended the brief siege. "You are our brothers. Don't worry," Khomeini's militiamen told the terrified U.S. diplomats and military officers. The U.S. ambassador told reporters that very same day, "We telephoned the Khomeini group and they came in and saved us in a nick of time." Most of those militiamen were soon after organized in a brand new armed unit, the Revolutionary Guard.

In the following months, the moderate Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan repeatedly reaffirmed that Tehran intended to have good relations with Washington. When he was attacked for being soft on the Americans by the far-left or by hard-liners in the Khomeini camp, Bazargan duly defended himself by saying Khomeini had himself sanctioned talks with the United States. Bazargan repeatedly asked for U.S. military and commercial trade, and on at least one occasion he requested intelligence from Washington. Economic ties, including Iranian purchases of American goods, continued, albeit on a much smaller scale than during the days of the shah.

In July 1979, another top Khomeini loyalist, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, met with the CIA's top Middle East man, Bob Ames, who offered Iran's new Islamist rulers the chance to launch strategic intelligence cooperation. For Iran's Islamists, the idea of working with the Americans was not yet the taboo that it later became. As such, the Khomeini circle spent much of 1979 calculating how the United States could be useful to them in the effort to checkmate local rivals such as leftist and secular nationalist political forces.

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Perhaps that is why a key Khomeini ally and future deputy supreme leader, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, met with U.S. officials as late as one week before the November storming of the U.S. Embassy. CIA communications **show** that, during the meeting, he expressed his “great admiration for President Carter” and hope for expansion of relations.

But one week later, it appears that all the goodwill was lost. Pro-Khomeini militiamen returned to the U.S. Embassy not as the rescuers, but now joining forces with the assailants. The attack had little to do with dogma; if the presence of the United States in Tehran was doctrinally anathema, it makes little sense that the Islamists would have waited almost 10 months after the shah had left Iran before storming, and this time holding on to, the U.S. Embassy. Rather than ideology, it was growing competition for power in Tehran that paved the way for this event.

Much has been written about whether Khomeini had prior knowledge about the plan to seize the embassy. He very likely did not but what is beyond doubt is that he blessed the continuation of the hostage crisis even as evidence piled up that the incident was costing Iran dearly on all levels. For him, consolidation of his grip on power on the home front mattered the most, and the crisis with Washington had distinct advantages.

At the time, three benefits stood out. First, the hostage crisis predictably led to the resignation and later marginalization of the “liberal” Islamists who surrounded Bazargan and were more loyal to him than the supreme leader. Second, the seizure suddenly put the United States on the defensive and forced it to reckon with Khomeini as the Shah’s only true successor. Third, the bulk of the radical leftist youth initially supported the take-over of the embassy, allowing Khomeini to peel off support from rival revolutionary factions.

When historians look at the evolution of the Islamic Republic since 1979, there is a tendency to want to explain its actions through religious ideology. Dogma has no doubt shaped much of this regime’s behavior, but not all of it. Another way to understand the regime’s actions is to look at the rivalries among top regime bosses. The headline here is that protecting the narrow interests of key factions inside the regime has often come at the expense of the national interest. The saga around the seizing of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran is clearest example of this Iranian tragedy.

**For Rouhani, a man elected twice on the promise of breaking Iran’s** international isolation, looking for ways to end the Islamic Republic’s obsession with the United States makes sense on a number of levels. Among others, the Iranian public is by all accounts hugely in favor of normalization of ties with Washington. The average

Iranian accepts that Iran will never be able to have a conventional foreign policy until it finds a way to talk to the United States. Meanwhile, Tehran's state-sanctioned proclivity for blaming all of the Middle East's ills on the United States—from the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s to the Yemeni conflict of today—is a real obstacle to potential dialogue.

For sure, Trump's all-or-nothing pitch for talks makes negotiating with him a tall order even for the Rouhani government. But Rouhani still understands that he needs to start treating the United States as what it is: the biggest power on the global stage and one Tehran senselessly chose to pick a fight with back in 1979, when there was no need to do so.

Those in Tehran in favor of turning a new page in relations with the United States still face rivals who maintain that abandoning hostility toward Washington would only weaken the fabric of Iran. This is not a new debate, but the unprecedented pressure that the Trump administration is putting on Iran is quietly but surely forcing the collective leadership in Tehran—with its various factions and divergent interests—to think harder about its posture toward the United States than at any time before. The writing, however, is on the wall and there is no good alternative to talking to Washington. Tehran's dreams of having the likes of China, Russia, or even Europe to come to its rescue have repeatedly come to naught. In fact, the former two benefit handsomely from the Iranian-U.S. standoff, and Europe cannot or will not be Tehran's defender.

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At this moment in time, no one faction in Tehran is likely to prevail singly on this matter. However, for the average Iranian, the hope is not about overturning decades of hostility toward the United States overnight. Rather, the hope is that some much-delayed policy introspection can start sooner rather than later, especially if the country grapples with some historical realities about why this state of affairs between Iran and the United States exists in the first place.

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