

# Distant Diplomacy

By Khody Akhavi | November 6, 2007

L. Bruce Laingen was working as a senior U.S. Foreign Service officer in Tehran in 1979 when student protestors, caught up in the fervor of Iran's Islamic Revolution, seized the U.S. Embassy and irrevocably changed the course of relations between the two nations.

Laingen and 51 other U.S. diplomats endured 444 days in captivity until their release on January 20, 1981. On that day, as he prepared to board the Algerian airliner that would finally take him to freedom, the U.S. *charge d'affaires* turned to one of his Iranian captors and said, "I look forward to the day your country and mine can have a normal diplomatic relationship."

Last Sunday marked 28 years exactly since the United States cut off diplomatic, business, and military ties with Iran in response to the hostage crisis. At a discussion sponsored by the Center for Global Justice and Reconciliation at Washington's National Cathedral last Monday, panelists engaged in a sobering debate rarely seen on the U.S. broadcast news outlets or, it seems, in the halls of Congress or the White House.

And the current stakes, the debate participants agreed, could not be any higher.

The rhetoric has reached a noxious fever pitch: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bewildering Holocaust denial mixed with President George W. Bush's warnings of an impending "World War III" should Iran acquire the means to develop nuclear weapons.

Citing the "poison rhetoric and policy paralysis that have characterized conduct of both countries," Laingen said: "We can all agree that the wall of mistrust is damn high. It will be difficult to remove."

Against the backdrop of U.S. failures in Iraq, Washington's bellicosity toward Iran has intensified. The Bush administration last month imposed the most sweeping set of unilateral sanctions on Iran since 1979 and proceeded with its controversial decision to brand the Quds Force unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps as a "terrorist organization" for its alleged proliferation of

weapons of mass destruction and the Quds Force's alleged support of terrorism in Iraq.

"The label of the word terrorist is so devoid of meaning now, it's hypocritical," said Stephen Kinzer, a former *New York Times* bureau chief and author of the book *All the Shah's Men*, about the 1953 CIA-backed coup d'etat to oust Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq.

"First we find groups around the world we don't like, then we find ways to label them as terrorists," he said, and referred to the U.S. double standard with regard to two Kurdish separatist groups that, on either side of Iraq's borders, attack Turkish and Iranian troops.

"One [the Kurdish Workers Party] is a terrorist, the other [Party for Free Life in Kurdistan] receives support from us," he said.

Bush's hard line has also drawn criticism from presumed international allies, such as Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who likened Washington's recent sanctions to "mad people wielding razor blades." Russia occupies a seat on the UN Security Council and maintains military and economic relations with Iran. Tehran remains defiant in the face of Washington's pressure to monitor its nuclear program, a process that Washington alleges would give the Iranians the technology to develop nuclear arms.

Analysts last Monday night said the current tensions underscore Washington's continued inability to understand Iran, its history, culture, the aspirations of its citizens, and the effects of the ill-fated U.S. policies on the overall psyche of Iranians.

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“There is a fundamental sympathy for democracy [in Iran]. ... Iranians have a democratic consciousness that is unique in the Middle East,” said Kinzer.

“Had it not been for the fact that the democratic government came to power in the 1950s, and became obsessed with the great project of nationalizing the Iranian oil reserves, there wouldn’t be a 1953,” said Kinzer. “Had we not overthrown the Mosaddeq government in 1953, we might have had a thriving democracy in the heart of the Middle East for these past 50 years.”

The CIA-backed coup, code-named Operation Ajaz, was carried out during President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s tenure and was supported by Britain. Using widespread bribery, the CIA overthrew Mossadeq and his cabinet and reinstalled Iran’s unpopular pro-U.S. dictator, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

And had it not been for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s 1981 invasion of Iran (and U.S. support for that invasion), the mullahs may not have been able to consolidate their political power, according to Iran specialist (and sometime Inter Press Service reporter) Trita Parsi.

“Khomeini survived, not in spite of, but because of the Iraqi invasion,” said Parsi. “War with Iran would result in Iranians rallying around the flag rather than turning away. The government would be strengthened instead of toppled. The Iranian nuclear program would most likely accelerate than be destroyed.”

Kinzer also criticized the U.S. mainstream press, which he argued, “has played a very shameful role in helping to fan the flames of war, just as we did in Iraq.”

“We truly have failed because we have always presented the problems with the United States and Iran through the official U.S. paradigm,” said Kinzer. “This is a classic failure of the press, which is why people so easily leap to support policies that are fundamentally against our own country.”

And then, there are the missed opportunities: the 2003 memorandum signed by Ayatollah Khamenei, a grand bargain in which the Iranians agreed to open the nuclear issue for full transparency, offered to stop support of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, agreed to make Hezbollah a political party (i.e. disarm the militia group), and promised to help support an Iraqi government that was not sectarian. The offer was presented to the White House by former Rep. Bob Ney (R-OH) several weeks after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but was ignored.

“The Iranians profess this offer doesn’t exist. It’s a prime example of missed opportunities and policy paralysis that can so easily set in,” said Laingen.

The debate moderator, Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD), also offered his perspective: “For the Senate or House to ramp up the rhetoric on the Revolutionary Guard as being terrorists, or insurgents, or rebels, only reduces the ability of that mistrust to subside,” he said.

“It’s beyond time for us to negotiate with Iranians. It’s time for old men to talk, before they send young men to die.”

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*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

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