



Going to Tehran: Prospects for U.S.-Iranian Engagement

U.S. Global Engagement

Flynt Leverett, Hillary Mann Leverett

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Introduction

DAVID SPEEDIE: Good evening and welcome to the Carnegie Council. I'm David Speedie, director of the Program on U.S. Global Engagement here at the Council. It's good to see a full house for a truly important event.

Our subject this evening is Iran, which, by any measure, is one of the most critical and indeed vexatious items in the inbox of the second [Obama administration](#). Some of you may have been [here](#) a few weeks ago for Ambassador [Hossein Mousavian](#). This is a welcome follow-up to that event.

In the beginning of the first Obama administration, things seemed to portend very well in terms of an evolution of U.S. policy toward Iran. You'll remember his famous [speech](#) in March of 2009 recognizing the Iranian holiday of [Nowruz](#), where he spoke "of a moment of renewal, a future with renewed exchanges among people, greater opportunities for partnerships and commerce." It was a warm address. It was videotaped to reach out directly to the Iranian people, promising some degree of engagement to replace or at least to move away to some extent from confrontation.

Unfortunately, it seems fairly clear that that has been more honored in the breach than the observance. Here probably there is some blame on both sides. It's reported that President [Obama](#) wrote twice to the Iranian supreme leader [Ali Khamenei](#) and did not receive a reply to at least one letter, and that President [Ahmadinejad](#) wrote to President Obama and did not receive a reply. We all remember from our ancient history days of writing letters that engagement is tough if you don't reply to letters.

But beyond these lapses in protocol, the fact is that the Obama first term saw a distinct hardening on an official level toward Iran, and specifically, a ratcheting-up of [sanctions](#). Since 2010, by my review, no fewer than eight executive orders were implemented broadening and tightening the sanctions that had been placed on Iran over the past 30 years. Just 10 days ago, a [Washington Post article](#) said, "While some previous U.S. sanctions targeted individuals and firms linked to Iran's nuclear industry, the new policies are closer to a true trade embargo, designed to systematically attack and undercut Iran's major pillars and threaten the country with economic collapse." That was actually a quote from a U.S. congressional official.

[Mark Dubowitz](#), the executive director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, was quoted in the same article as saying, "This is effectively blacklisting whole sectors of the Iranian economy. The

goal is to create a chilling effect on all non-humanitarian commercial trade with Iran."

Of course, the non-humanitarian qualification here may be in question with the issue of Iran's claims of loss of access to vital medical supplies and so on and so forth.

The bottom line is that the policy seems to be to keep engagement on the board—as well as armed intervention, by the way—while pressing quite relentlessly for new sanctions.

On the other hand, [Trita Parsi](#), the head of the American Iranian Council, around the same time as this article I just quoted, [wrote](#) that "a deal may be finally in the making. Both sides appear to be preparing the ground in their own ways for a compromise."

Now to this evening. To help us navigate these mightily choppy waters, we have two scholars and policy analysts who quite literally have dedicated their recent careers 100 percent to Iran, to U.S.-Iranian relations, and to what they see as questionable aspects of U.S. policy.

Hillary Mann Leverett is a senior professorial lecturer at American University in Washington, D.C. and a visiting scholar at Peking University in Beijing, China. In the [George W. Bush administration](#), she worked as director for Iran, Afghanistan, and Persian Gulf Affairs at the National Security Council [NSC]; as Middle East expert in the [secretary of state's](#) policy planning staff; and political advisor for Middle East, Central Asian, and African issues at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. In the [Clinton administration](#), she also served as a political advisor for the Middle East, Central Asia, and African issues for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations; associate director for Near Eastern Affairs at the NSC; and special assistant to the ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. She holds a Juris Doctor from Harvard and a bachelor of arts in Near Eastern studies from Brandeis University.

Flynt Leverett is an old friend. Flynt is a veteran of a program at the Council we called "[The Rise of the Rest](#)" and sat on this platform [before](#). It's a great pleasure to welcome Flynt back.

Flynt is a professor at Pennsylvania State University School of International Affairs and also a visiting scholar at Peking University School of International Studies. From 1992 to 2003, he had a distinguished career in the U.S. government, serving as senior director for Middle Eastern affairs at the NSC, on the secretary of state's policy planning staff, and as a CIA senior analyst. He has written extensively on the politics, international relations, and political economy of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and he has published opinion pieces in many high-profile venues, including *The New York Times*, CNN, and as a frequent contributor to *Foreign Policy*.

So the pedigree of this husband-and-wife team is quite remarkable. They have just launched their new blog, www.GoingToTehran.com. Their new book of the same title, [Going to Tehran](#), has just been published by Metropolitan Books.

I'll just very briefly extract three central arguments that seem to me to undergird the book and then pass to our panelists.

(1) They say Iran is now the most critical country in the world's most critical and perilous region.

(2) Common and false assumptions to the contrary, Iran's political order is not on the verge of collapse, and most Iranians still support the Islamic republic.

(3) It follows that without some degree of rapprochement with Tehran, the U.S. will lose its strategic position in the Middle East, with disastrous consequences for the U.S. global standing.

Big issues, and I would like to ask you to help me welcome Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett to take them up with us.

Remarks

HILLARY MANN LEVERETT: Thank you very much, David, and thank you for having us. Thank you all for coming this evening. It's really a pleasure for us to be here. We look forward to speaking to you, but then also having a very rigorous and vibrant conversation this evening.

I'm going to start with, I think, two of the most provocative themes, really, at the heart of our new book, *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*. The first of these provocative themes is that the United States is a declining power in the Middle East. The second theme is that the biggest beneficiary of America's ongoing decline in the Middle East is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

If you're not sure you agree with those assessments, I want to ask you to compare the relative positions of the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, where they are today with where they were just over 10 years ago on the eve of 9/11. On the eve of 9/11, every single government in the Middle East—every single one—was either reflexively pro-American, like the governments in Egypt and Turkey; in negotiations to effectively become pro-American, like Assad's government in Syria and Qaddafi's government in Libya; or virulently anti-Iranian, like Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq or the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

But today, because of elections, governments across the Middle East, in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey, and Iraq, are no longer reflexively pro-American and anti-Iranian; they are all pursuing today at least independent foreign policies that make them much less enthusiastic about strategic cooperation with the United States and much more open to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Simply put, today, relatively speaking, the United States is in a profoundly weaker position and the Islamic Republic of Iran is in a significantly stronger position in the Middle East than they both were on the eve of 9/11.

We argue in our book that this has essentially happened because of a dramatic shift in the Middle East's balance of power. In our book we describe that part of the reason for this shift is mistakes the United States has made in its policies in the Middle East, but we also describe a phenomenon in the book that is vastly underappreciated, particularly in the United States. That is, the shift in the Middle East balance of power is also happening because of successes of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

And we argue that these two are inextricably linked—American policy mistakes and the successes of the Islamic Republic of Iran—and that, in fact, it's America's dysfunctional policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran that is at the very heart of America's decline in the Middle East, and that it will be only strategic realignment by the United States with the Islamic Republic of Iran that will enable America's strategic recovery in the Middle East.

We unpack this in the book by examining the basis for American dominance in the Middle East, something that we argue has been increasingly driven since the end of the Cold War by America's unique capacity to project overwhelming conventional military force into the Middle East. This is something that no other country can do, not even China, and no other country will be able to do so for years to come. This muscle has given the United States extraordinary economic and political influence in the Middle East. In fact, it has reinforced our political and military dominance in other critical areas of the world.

But we argue that American failures in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#) have underscored for the world, and particularly for Middle Eastern publics, the limits of what American military might can accomplish.

We also argue that these failures in Afghanistan and Iraq and other policy failures were not just idiosyncratic, ideologically generated products of the George W. Bush administration. We describe how these stem from a much deeper source that cuts across the partisan divide, cuts across Democratic and Republican administrations. We really describe it as the United States, in fact, giving in to a post-Cold War temptation to act as an imperial power in the Middle East. This imperial turn in America's Middle East policy—pursued, we argue, with very little regard for realities on the ground in the Middle East—has proven not just quixotic, but deeply damaging to American interests.

As a candidate back in 2008, President Obama seemed to really understand this. In fact, he pledged not just to withdraw American troops from Iraq, but he said he wanted to change the "mindset" that had gotten the United States into the strategic mistake of invading Iraq in the first place and that he would fundamentally change American policies in the Middle East. Instead, what has happened is that President Obama has pursued the same sorts of policies as his predecessors, policies that did such damage to America's strategic position.

As a result, for example, today the Obama administration is not just presiding over a stalled Middle East peace process; it is presiding over the very demise of a two-state solution of the [Palestinian-Israeli conflict](#). While the Obama administration's military [intervention](#) in Libya was able to [overthrow Qaddafi](#), it is now incubating in Libya, and maybe all of North Africa, a significant threat to American security interests. As we document in our book, President Obama and the Obama administration have gone beyond President [Bush](#) and his administration's threatening of the Islamic Republic of Iran to now actually discrediting engagement as a strategy for dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, by saying that they tried to reach out to the Islamic Republic and failed, when in fact they never seriously tried.

The results are that on President Obama's watch, the Middle East balance of power has shifted even further away from the United States and our allies and even more towards the Islamic Republic and its allies than it was at the end of the George W. Bush Administration.

Beyond America's decline in the Middle East, what we show in our book is how the Islamic Republic of Iran has become the biggest beneficiary of these mistakes and our decline. We lay out how, by pursuing a foreign policy and building a domestic political order that attracts Middle Eastern populations, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to take advantage of American mistakes to improve its own position dramatically in the Middle East. The key to the Islamic Republic's success has been beyond this shift in the Middle East regional distribution of power, relative distribution of power, that I outlined earlier among the important actors—who has it and who doesn't.

Even beyond that, the Middle East balance of power is itself fundamentally changing. It is increasingly less defined by hard military capabilities, where the United States has the clear overwhelming advantage and the Islamic Republic of Iran is relatively deficient, and becoming more and more defined by who can appeal to regional publics—in a sense, a balance of influence, where the Islamic Republic has real and important advantages.

As we explain in our book, the Islamic Republic of Iran is both encouraging and taking advantage of this transformation in the Middle East.

One of the most remarkable things about this shift in the Middle East balance of power, again away from the United States and our allies and towards the Islamic Republic and its allies, is that it has

had virtually nothing to do with Iran's use of military force or economic coercion. It's not about Iran invading anybody or sanctioning anybody. It's about the Islamic Republic's soft power.

In our book we try to set this into really a strategic context. A critical set of sources that we drew on for this strategic context were our unique and unparalleled opportunities to sit with and listen—just listen for hours and hours—to Iranian diplomats, Iranian national security officials, and analysts explain how the world looks strategically from their point of view, something rarely done in American analyses of the Islamic Republic.

Some of this seems pretty basic, but it's important. What we learned is that from Tehran, one sees 15 neighboring states, nearly all of whom have been hostile to the very idea of an Islamic Republic—and, in fact, not just hostile, but Iran's neighbor to the east, Afghanistan, under the Taliban killed several of the Islamic Republic's diplomats in their consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Iran's neighbor to the west, Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, with help from Iran's other Arab neighbors and the United States, [invaded](#) the Islamic Republic in its early years, ending up killing 300,000 Iranians.

Today, in those same Arab states that supported Saddam Hussein in Iraq's invasion of Iran, killing all those people, there are now thousands of American troops and billions of dollars in the most deadly American weapons systems all poised to, and threatening to, attack the Islamic Republic of Iran to disarm it of weapons of mass destruction it does not have.

To deal with these significant security challenges, the Islamic Republic of Iran has built a strong defensive military capability. But something that rarely is noticed is that that defensive military capability has virtually no applicability to an offensive capability. Iran has virtually no capacity to deploy its military power offensively beyond its borders. So what it has relied on, and the real key to its success, its national security success, has been its soft power, this soft power strategy.

It's a strategy that is not understood in the West, but I think is critically important. It is a strategy that galvanizes the regional publics' most intensely felt grievances, including their grievances against the United States and against Israel and, most importantly, against their own unrepresentative, pro-Western regimes. The Islamic Republic then aligns itself with these galvanized publics and public opinion itself to constrain those governments and the United States from attacking it.

Just think about how Bahrain's clearly [angry population](#) would react if we used our Fifth Fleet, based in their country, to attack the Islamic Republic of Iran. U.S. military planners could hope that that population would be passive, an assumption they held just about five years ago, but today seems clearly reckless, and reckless because the Islamic Republic's strategy has worked. Its soft power strategy to appeal to regional populations has worked to constrain the United States and to constrain these hostile, unrepresentative, pro-Western governments surrounding it.

The Islamic Republic has reinforced this over years by picking what I would call winners in other regional arenas. It's kind of controversial to call them winners, but in a sense that's what they are, if you look at it, I think, soberly—groups like [Hamas](#), groups like [Hezbollah](#), Iraqi Shia groups, even Egypt's [Muslim Brotherhood](#). It has picked these groups as its allies in all of these regional arenas. Their bet today has paid off. Because of elections, all of these groups have now become the most influential players across the Middle East. That's an effective strategy. The result is that today it's the Islamic Republic and its ideas of participatory Islamist governance and independent foreign policy that have the real influence in countries from Egypt to Bahrain, countries and governments once clearly in America's camp.

In strategic terms, the Islamic Republic has been and is using through its narrative—not its drones, not its tanks, but through its narrative—the political awakening of Middle Eastern publics to alter the very nature of power politics in the Middle East.

I'll now turn it to Flynt to continue.

FLYNT LEVERETT: Thank you.

It is challenging, we recognize, but also critically important for Americans to understand that it's only an Islamic Republic of Iran which can accrue the kinds of soft power gains that Hillary described. The [Shah](#) couldn't have done it. A pro-Western secular republic of Iran couldn't have done it. Only the Islamic Republic of Iran can do it.

But as we discuss in our book, instead of recognizing this, American political/policy/media elites persist in depicting the Islamic Republic as an illegitimate system so despised by its own population that it's in imminent danger of overthrow. American elites have been doing this for more than 30 years, virtually since the Islamic Republic's founding out of the 1979 [Iranian Revolution](#). For more than 30 years, the Islamic Republic has consistently defied these relentless predictions of its collapse or defeat.

The Islamic Republic has survived because its basic model—this integration of participatory politics and elections with principles and institutions of Islamic governance and a strong commitment to foreign policy independence—according to polls, electoral participation rates, and other indicators, this model is in actual fact what a majority of Iranians living inside their country want. They don't want a political order grounded in Western-style secular liberalism. They want an indigenously generated political order reflecting their cultural and religious values.

As the reformist president [Mohammad Khatami](#) wrote shortly before leaving office, they want "freedom, independence, and progress within the context of both religiosity and national identity."

That's what the Islamic Republic, with all its flaws, offers Iranians the chance to pursue. This was the vision of Imam [Khomeini](#), embodied in the Islamic Republic's constitution, and even those Iranians who want the Islamic Republic to evolve in significant ways—at the end of the day, even most of them still want it to be the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Islamic Republic has made progress in some impressive ways. Contrary to deeply rooted but ill-informed Western stereotypes, the Islamic Republic has achieved far more progressive outcomes in alleviating poverty, delivering health care, providing educational access, and, yes, expanding opportunities for women than the Shah's regime ever did. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I'm talking about.

The Islamic Republic has developed a health care system that has greatly increased life expectancy and greatly reduced infant and child mortality in Iran. The provision of health care to rural areas has been particularly impressive since the revolution. The Islamic Republic has basically equalized health outcomes in urban and rural settings in a manner which is quite extraordinary in an international context.

And get this: There are now Iranian doctors and public health specialists working with state universities and NGOs in Mississippi to introduce Iranian style rural health care delivery into medically underserved parts of the Mississippi Delta. The Islamic Republic has also greatly expanded educational opportunities, vastly increasing literacy rates and, according to the World

Bank, basically eliminating gender disparities in educational access.

One facet of women's progress in Iran that remains almost completely unappreciated in the West is the way that access to higher education is altering the status of Iranian women. While the Islamic Republic places restrictions on women—in matters of dress, for example—that Westerners would consider unacceptable in their own societies, the majority of university students in Iran are now female. The majority of students in Iran's best universities are now female. The majority of Iran's medical students are female. And women's presence is felt increasingly across an array of academic and professional disciplines. Hillary and I, for example, have met deans and department chairs at the University of Tehran who are female.

We have also, by the way, seen female bus and taxi drivers in Tehran. Contrast that with Saudi Arabia, where women are still not allowed to drive.

Notwithstanding the Islamic Republic's staying power, foreign policy pundits, who in many cases have no direct connection to on-the-ground reality inside Iran, and a cadre of so-called Iran experts, many of whom are Iranian expatriates or Iranian-Americans whose families fled the revolution and don't want to see the Islamic Republic succeed—these commentators continue telling us that the system is on the verge of collapse. One of our themes in *Going to Tehran* is that until Americans stop listening to the agenda-driven, fact-free analysis coming from such people, the United States will continue to get its Iran policy wrong and will continue losing ground in the Middle East.

A good example of what I'm talking about in this regard came in 2009, when, in a collective act of analysis by wishful thinking, American elites widely anticipated a victory by former prime minister [Mir-Hossein Mousavi](#) over incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in that year's [Iranian presidential election](#).

Many American analysts saw Mousavi victory as the key to solving America's strategic problems in the Middle East, and when, in June 2009, Ahmadinejad won, those same analysts and elites almost universally condemned the outcome as a fraud. They did so even though every methodologically sound poll conducted in Iran before and after the election, including polls conducted by Western polling groups—14 polls in all—showed that Ahmadinejad's reelection with roughly two-thirds of the vote, which is what the official results show that he got, was eminently plausible. And American elites embraced this narrative of election fraud even though neither Mousavi nor anyone else ever presented any evidence of how the election was stolen.

This never-demonstrated-but-fervently-espoused narrative conditioned American and Western elites' romanticization of the [Green Movement](#), widely portrayed in the West as a mass popular uprising poised to sweep away the Islamic Republic, perhaps within just a few months. But it was evident to anyone prepared to look soberly at reality that even at its height, the Green Movement did not represent anything close to a majority of Iranians and that, within a week of the June 2009 election, the movement's social base was already contracting.

Yet the myth of the Islamic Republic's illegitimacy and instability did not die. Indeed, it got a new lease on life in early 2011, when the [Arab Awakening](#) began. Through the pro-Green lens that continues to shape much Western commentary on Iranian politics, it seemed inevitable that the waves of popular discontent breaking across the Arab world would soon engulf the Iranian government, too. Most of the pundits who had jumped on the regime-change bandwagon in 2009 hopped back on for another ride.

On February 20, 2011, billionaire financier [George Soros](#), appearing on CNN's *GPS* with [Fareed](#)

[Zakaria](#), offered a bet that "the Iranian regime will not be there in a year's time."

A few days later, in *Foreign Policy*, Hillary and I [took Soros up](#) on his wager. I recognize that the notion of two former U.S. government officials turned university professors betting George Soros on anything could seem rather absurd. But that's what we did. We even bet that not only would the Islamic Republic still be Iran's government in a year's time, but that the balance of influence and power in the Middle East would be tilted even further in its favor. Almost two years have elapsed since Soros made his wager, and I have to say we're pretty eager to collect on it.

Over the last couple of years, we have also had mainstream media outlets, going to the same sorts of questionable sources and the same so-called Iran experts who had proven themselves so colossally wrong on the 2009 election and on the Green Movement, tell us that perceived tensions between President Ahmadinejad and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, were "unprecedented signs of an insecure regime fracturing at the top."

We even had the main analytic piece about the [2012 parliamentary elections](#) in *The New York Times* last year telling us that Khamenei might have had his son rig the elections so that he could get rid of [Ali Larijani](#) as speaker of the parliament, install a relative-by-marriage as speaker, abolish the presidency to get rid of Ahmadinejad, and make the Islamic Republic a prime ministerial system with a prime minister that he could presumably more easily control.

Not a single one of these points was true. Not a single one was correct. Not a single one of them came to pass. In fact, they couldn't come to pass because altering the Islamic Republic's constitution in this manner can only be done by popular referendum. And there is historical precedent for that. But that's what we are told by our mainstream media.

Tensions between elected presidents and the leader in Iran are hardly new. One would have to be willfully ignorant of the Islamic Republic's political history to assert otherwise. They are not an indicator of systemic crisis. They are politics as usual in a system with multiple power centers and institutionalized checks and balances.

But in the fact-free approach of so many Iran so-called experts here, if Iranians display the sort of contestation over policy and relative position within their system that virtually anywhere else in the world we call normal politics, then our Iran experts tell us that this is something abnormal and pathological, and that the system must be coming apart. It is not.

Today the myth of the Islamic Republic's illegitimacy and fragility comes in two interlocking versions: One, that sanctions are now finally working to undermine the Islamic Republic's basic stability; two, that the Arab Awakening has left the Islamic Republic isolated in its own neighborhood.

On sanctions, Hillary and I have just returned from our most recent visit to Iran last month. No one who has walked the streets of Tehran recently, seen that Iran's economy is not collapsing, and talked with a range of Iranians could possibly think that sanctions are working in a way that will compel either the Islamic Republic's implosion or its surrender to American demands on the nuclear issue.

On the Arab Awakening, the same pundits who say that sanctions are working advise you to embrace the logic-defying proposition that the same social currents which deposed pro-American leaders in Tunisia and Egypt and are empowering Islamists in countries across the Arab world—that those same social currents will in Iran somehow transform the Islamic Republic into a secular liberal state. That is truly logic-defying.

What all this constantly-getting-Iran-wrong reflects is a delusion, a delusion that the United States is still basically in control of the strategic situation in the Middle East. Sanctions, we are told, are inflicting ever-rising hardship on Iran's economy. Either Tehran will surrender to U.S. demands or the Iranian public will rise up and transform the Islamic Republic into a pro-Western liberal state. If neither of those things happens, then at some point the American military will destroy Iranian nuclear sites.

This is a truly dangerous delusion, grounded in illusions about Middle Eastern reality.

Here's reality: Because of failed wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, a [war on terror](#) that has turned Muslim societies ever more firmly against U.S. policy, and de facto support for open-ended Israeli occupation of Arab populations, America's position in the region is in free fall. Increasingly mobilized publics will not tolerate continuation of such policies. If in this climate the United States launches another war to disarm yet another Middle Eastern country, as Hillary said, of weapons of mass destruction it does not have, the blowback against American interests will be disastrous.

But that is where our current strategy is leading us. For its own interest, Washington must take a fundamentally different approach. This is the approach captured in the title of our book, *Going to Tehran*, and in its subtitle, *Coming to Terms with the Islamic Republic*.

The United States needs to come to terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran, this rising revolutionary power, not as a favor to Iran, but to save its own position in the Middle East and avert the strategic catastrophe of another Middle Eastern war. Coming to terms with the Islamic Republic means accepting it as a legitimate political order, representing legitimate national interests, and as a rising regional power unwilling to subordinate its foreign policy to Washington. No American president since the Iranian revolution, not even Barack Hussein Obama, has been prepared to do this. But it is a key argument in our book that this is not just the only basis on which diplomacy with Iran can succeed; it is the only way for Obama to avert strategic catastrophe in his second term.

There's an important precedent in recent American history for the kind of diplomacy we're talking about. Accepting a rising regional power as a legitimate entity pursuing its interests in a fundamentally rational and defensive way is how President [Nixon](#) and [Henry Kissinger](#) enabled the historic [opening to China](#) in the early 1970s. Their achievement was not to talk to Beijing. Washington had been doing that for years. Their achievement was to accept and to persuade Americans to accept the People's Republic as, in Nixon's words, a nation pursuing its own interests as it perceives them just as we follow our own interests as we see them.

Nixon came to office with a deep understanding that the United States needed rapprochement with the People's Republic. For 20 years, from the time of the Chinese revolution, the United States had tried to isolate and undermine the People's Republic. It had pursued not just a policy of regime change towards the People's Republic; it recognized this whole other political apparatus based on Taiwan as the "real government" of China. The results of this policy were disastrous for the United States. It undermined the U.S. position in Asia and got us into the disastrously draining quagmire of [Vietnam](#).

Nixon's initiative to realign relations with China saved America's position in Asia after the draining catastrophe of Vietnam and restored Washington's global leadership. If Obama accepted the Islamic Republic in the same way, equally thorough U.S.-Iran relations would be possible.

Ayatollah Khamenei and the three Iranian presidents elected over the course of Khamenei's now

22-year tenure as supreme leader have all said repeatedly that Iran is open to better relations with America, but only on the basis of mutual respect, equality, and American acceptance of the Islamic Republic. Today, engaging Iran on this basis is Obama's single biggest foreign policy challenge. We'll see if he's up to it.

Questions

QUESTION: Thank you so much. I have two quick questions, as an Iranian.

First, could you comment on the human rights abuses? Clearly when there are protests, like in 2009, in America we don't have, like in Iran, [snipers shooting people](#) and murdering them like we did on the streets of Tehran, albeit a very kind of Western, secular population that demonstrated. I agree with your point.

The second is that there was a *New York Times* [piece](#) on the sale of small arms and light munitions by the Iranians into Africa. Are they getting into that business?

FLYNT LEVERETT: On your question about human rights and the post-election situation in 2009, let me just point out—by way of comparison—the real issue is, whatever you or I may think about the human rights situation in Iran, as Americans, should this keep the United States from doing what its strategic interests require? When Richard Nixon made his historic visit to Beijing in 1972, the [Cultural Revolution](#) was still going on. The Chinese government had over the preceding several years killed probably around 3 million of its own citizens. Nixon went to Beijing anyway.

I think he did the right thing. And it would be very hard, I think, to make a plausible argument today that the United States, the Chinese people, the world would be better off if he hadn't gone.

By comparison, in clashes between demonstrators and security forces following the 2009 election, if you believe government sources, you're talking about 30-some-odd people who were killed; if you believe opposition sources, you're talking about a higher number than that, but it's still fewer than 100.

Every life lost is a tragedy. But should that be an excuse for the United States not to do what its interests require? Personally I don't think so.

HILLARY MANN LEVERETT: I'll come to the second question you had. I don't have any direct knowledge about whether Iran is selling small arms anywhere in the world, let alone to Africa. But I think what's important to analyze in terms of a national security strategy that works so effectively for them is that, unlike the Shah, they are able to reach out to groups and peoples, on a religious basis, on an ethnic basis, on an ideological basis, beyond Iran's borders in an extraordinarily effective way.

I think the core of that is a soft power strategy. It's one where they galvanize through rhetoric, through making common cause with people, again across religious, ethnic, and ideological divides that Iran has a connection to. But they do buttress a lot of these relationships, whether it's in Africa or whether it's Hezbollah or Hamas or the Shia political parties and their associated militias in Iraq. Certainly Iran, there are a lot of indicia, has been involved in providing weapons and money to buttress those relationships.

But our focus on that really takes us away from the enormous power their soft power strategy has had, that it's only an Islamic Republic that can have a relationship with Hezbollah to begin with, that can help to form Hezbollah to begin with. It's only an Islamic Republic in Iran that could have a

relationship with a range of Shia groups in Iraq to now decisively have influence over the government there and the future political order in Iraq. It's only an Islamic Republic that can do that.

FLYNT LEVERETT: Let me also say, in the African case, like Hillary said, we don't know what Iran is doing or not doing in that regard in Africa. One thing we do know for sure is that one of our most important allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, is spending enormous amounts of money to fund and equip, including equip with weapons, Salafi groups with a kind of violent jihadi ideology throughout the Middle East and in other parts of the world where there are significant Muslim populations.

To whatever extent the Islamic Republic might be involved in the kinds of activities you were suggesting, I would suggest maybe looking at it in terms of the bigger context. What are the Saudis doing in this regard?

We have been burned by this before. [Al-Qaeda](#) wouldn't exist but for Saudi Arabia. The Taliban wouldn't exist but for Saudi Arabia. Yet we call the Islamic Republic the world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism.

QUESTION: Jeff Laurenti at the Century Foundation.

What you accurately described as the mania in Washington about the illegitimacy and fragility of the Iranian republic is particularly propagated in conservative circles and in such circles that are particularly concerned about Israeli interests in American politics. But regime change does not seem to have been Obama's line. Regime change is clearly an objective to the right, but Obama has on several formal occasions spoken of the Islamic Republic of Iran and has specifically seemed to disavow regime change as his objective.

The fact is that the current administration in Iran has markedly hardened its attitudes on at least two of the issues that resonate so much in the American political debate, the nuclear program and Israel, as President Ahmadinejad's somewhat promiscuous rhetoric has offered openings, and as Hossein Mousavi's exile, in effect, is a sign.

So I wonder if you could share with us your sense of what we should expect the Iranian government to do coming halfway towards America, especially given that hardening on the rhetoric that has come out of Tehran since 2005, and also the appointments that Obama made in giving the State Department to [Hillary Clinton](#)—whether there might be some greater nuance in the next four years with [John Kerry](#). Do you think there's a subtle difference that one may see playing out?

HILLARY MANN LEVERETT: You make a lot of very interesting and important points. I think one of the reasons that we continue to raise the issue of the 2009 election in Iran that was widely, and we think without any evidence, condemned here as a fraud is so important—because people say to us, "Let it go. It doesn't matter. Just move on"—the reason it still matters is because that election and the reaction to it here is what sunk the liberal support—the Democratic Party support essentially—for real engagement. Our view is that a lot of liberals, a lot of Democrats also want regime change in Iran, but they want to have soft regime change. They think the mistake of the Bush era was that Bush tried to bring regime change and democracy with tanks. And that can't happen. That seems nonsensical to, especially, many liberals and Democrats.

But the idea, I think, that really took hold in the Democratic Party and among Democratic foreign policy elites, was that they could do it better. That there could be an "Obama effect" was even the discussion right before the 2009 election in Iran. There could be an Obama effect. It would happen in

Lebanon. Hezbollah wouldn't get as much support as it did. In Iran, Mousavi would come into office and solve our Ahmadinejad problem. We wouldn't have to deal with any of his fiery rhetoric or any of these hard-line policies from Iran.

That is what is so important. It discredited engagement, because it made engagement dependent on a good Iranian regime, whereas we argue that this is not something that Iran has to be good or bad about. It's a recognition of the importance of Iran geopolitically, its location, its resources, and its importance as an Islamic republic, as an enduring power, and a power that has tremendous influence in the region. So we think it is critically important.

Then some of the appointments, of course, that Obama made in his first term, I think, reinforced this idea that there was going to have to be tremendous give on the Iranian part, tremendous concessions on the Iranian part. Appointing Hillary Clinton as secretary of state, appointing [Dennis Ross](#) to be in charge of the Iran file essentially from the State Department into the White House sent all of the signals that Iran was going to have to somehow come halfway and somehow make these concessions.

But if you look at what happened with Nixon and Kissinger's diplomacy with China, there wasn't a list that Nixon and Kissinger had for China. In fact, Kissinger recounts that the Americans and the Chinese, before the acceptance of the People's Republic of China, met 136 times—136 meetings. In each one of those meetings the Americans demanded that the Chinese do X, Y, and Z; the Chinese demanded that the Americans do A, B, and C. Kissinger realized that all those discussions were doing was entrenching and hardening the positions on both sides. The real insight was to accept the People's Republic of China as it was, following its interests rationally and defensibly, and that we could bracket differences—we could bracket Taiwan, we could bracket Japan and South Korea. We could bracket differences.

That's where we think it's important to focus.

FLYNT LEVERETT: You raised Obama actually letting the official name of the country, the Islamic Republic of Iran, come out of his mouth. That happened most significantly in what David alluded to in his introduction for us, in the March 2009 Nowruz video, which he addresses to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We can tell you, that rhetoric registered in Tehran. On Nowruz itself, every year Ayatollah Khamenei gives this annual address from Mashhad. In that year's address two days after Obama's video, the Iranians decided to use the address in part as a response to Obama's video. It's very, very interesting to look at the text of the address. Ayatollah Khamenei goes through basically the litany of Iranian grievances against the United States that I think most of us know. But then he says, "But there is a new administration in the United States. We have no experience with this administration. President Obama says he wants change. Okay, but change has to be in more than just words. We will say to President Obama, 'If you change your policies towards us, we will change, too.'"

We have talked to Iranian officials who were involved in helping prepare that address and who told us that that formulation was very deliberate. It's not "and here are the three things you need to change to prove your bona fides to us." What if he does all three of those things and he gets hammered domestically for caving to our demands? What if he only does two of the three things we demand? What do we do then?

No. "If you change your policies towards us—and we'll basically leave it up to you to determine what's significant change—we will change, too."

In terms of concrete policies, the policies have gotten worse under Obama. The contrast with Nixon—when Nixon came to office in 1969, knowing he needed to pursue rapprochement with China, two of the first things he did in office were to order the CIA to stand down from covert operations in Tibet and he ordered the Seventh Fleet to stop what the Chinese considered aggressive patrolling in the Taiwan Strait. He did it because, he said, "If the Chinese are going to take me seriously when I reach out to them, they have to have concrete evidence that I mean it." Obama has never given that evidence.

QUESTION: James Starkman.

You're sitting behind a sign there that says "Ethics in International Affairs." The nation of Iran signed the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) [NPT]. That is the flashpoint which all the current tension is surrounding. Like individuals, a nation's word has to be its bond. Where do you stand on that? How would you defend Iran's behavior with regard to this, their failure to permit inspections to assure that these are peaceful purposes?

FLYNT LEVERETT: First of all, it's not our place to defend Iran. They have diplomats and others who do that.

What I would say on the NPT is, I agree with you, nations should keep their commitments. But that also means the United States should keep its commitments. Under the NPT, Iran has a right—it has a sovereign right and then, under the NPT, it has a treaty-based right—to pursue indigenous peaceful nuclear capabilities, including fuel cycle capabilities, including the enrichment of uranium, under safeguards. The International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] continues to certify in all of its reports on Iran's nuclear activities that there has been no diversion of nuclear material in Iran.

The Iranian position, as I understand it, is that Iran would be prepared to grant more access, beyond the minimum required by its safeguards agreement. They would be prepared to, say, ratify and implement the additional protocols of the NPT, perhaps accept other measures which would permit more proactive, more intrusive inspections by the IAEA. But they want the United States to recognize Iran's right to enrich.

The U.S. demand right now is that Iran must get to a complete halt, a complete suspension, of enrichment activities. Iran is saying that is not consistent with the NPT.

If the Obama administration were prepared to accept Iran's right to safeguard and enrichment, I think you could have a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue in pretty short order.

QUESTION: Krishen Mehta, with the Aspen Institute.

If we assume that the [election in 2012](#) sent an important message about what the American public is looking for in both domestic and foreign policy, and if we assume that President Nixon's stance on changing certain mindsets in advance of rapprochement with China applies also in this situation, what kinds of things would you, if you were still part of the national security team, advise the president to do to set the stage now, over the next two or three years, to achieve the rapprochement that the world would like to see so that catastrophic actions like America has had in Iraq and other locations can be avoided?

HILLARY MANN LEVERETT: We actually said this when President Obama was elected the first time, that he could take a page essentially from the Nixon and Kissinger script. There were many things that had been appropriated and decided and approved under the Bush administration that

came to his desk and he didn't have to continue. He could have changed course, and he still can. Some of those are the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been appropriated for covert operations. To kill Iranian scientists in the streets of Tehran, a very crowded city, is something that doesn't need to be done. That's a signal that would go far, I think, in Tehran. The sabotage and the other kinds of covert activities, the cyber warfare—those are all things that can either be turned off or dramatically dialed down.

The way that we also patrol in the Persian Gulf, that can be changed. We don't have to continuously make that more aggressive and add more to our fleets there.

Those are two things that Nixon and Kissinger did vis-à-vis China that can be replicated with the Islamic Republic.

The core argument at the end of our book in terms of how to change this dynamic is, first, this intellectual acceptance of the political order in the Islamic Republic. That's a first-order necessity. But after that, Obama will need to go to Tehran, just as Nixon and Kissinger needed to go to Beijing.

Many people say to us, "But there has to be some show of support. They have to welcome that." We say two things in that regard. Over the 32-plus-year history of the Islamic Republic, they have been willing to meet with American officials time and time again. In the 1980s during the [Reagan administration](#)—we know of it as the [Iran-Contra affair](#). But the Iranians didn't cut off that dialogue with the United States. We did.

Again, President [George H.W. Bush](#) elicited our help. We have a distinguished diplomat here from the United Nations who participated in that. It wasn't the Iranians who stopped those negotiations or refused to continue to go forward with better relations. It was the United States.

Again under the Clinton administration, the Clinton administration coordinated with Iran to get weapons to Muslims in Bosnia.

Again, my own personal experience when I worked for the State Department and the White House was that a very fruitful, constructive dialogue we had with the Iranians over Afghanistan met with the "[Axis of Evil](#)" speech that President Bush delivered from Congress.

So we have a history of Iranian willingness to accept American efforts to cooperate at least.

But beyond that, we say that really shouldn't be the focus. When Nixon and Kissinger went to Beijing, they weren't even assured that they would have a meeting with Chairman [Mao](#). I think it was two weeks before that, the [then-emperor of Ethiopia](#) went to Beijing. There were Ethiopian flags in the street. People came out to see the motorcade come to Beijing from the airport. There was a lot of fanfare. People were told to be very happy for this visit. When Nixon and Kissinger came, people were told to stay home. It was a cold reception. He was not welcomed with open arms. It was something where the United States had to prove, after Vietnam, after the disastrous impacts of U.S. policy in Asia, that we wanted something different.

We argue two things. One is that the Islamic Republic has been receptive to talks that would be on the basis of mutual respect. But that's not even what's important here. The importance is to understand what our interests are and to go after them for our own interests, not to do the Iranians a favor.

QUESTION: Thank you. [Giandomenico Picco](#). I'm not representing anybody, just myself.

As far as I know—and I only speak to what I have been exposed to and, to some extent, been rather involved in—the West, mainly the U.S., and Iran have been involved in negotiations 12 times in the last 30 years—12 that I know of. Of these 12 negotiations, 11 ended up with a success for the West. One was declined, though the offer was actually quite pleasant because it would have put the French oil company in a very difficult position. So that was, we'll say, a draw.

So on one side, we have 12 negotiations and over the last 21 years, we have been told 16 times that Iran will have a nuclear weapon in two years.

I don't know anything about nuclear weapons. But my point is that the fact of the 12 negotiations that have been successful has never come up. We are not having a discussion about negotiating between Iran and the U.S. We have been doing that for three decades. So what are we talking about?

Last but not least, I would like to have your comment. In 2005—I was already out of business—I received a comment from an Iranian high official who said to me, "We do not know how to handle the following. We have discovered that the American government is indeed the most generous government on earth"—and this was not a joke—"for two reasons: First of all, because their 2003 war has given us the possibility to vindicate 1534," which, of course, is a very familiar date in Washington, "therefore, allowing us to come back from where we had been expelled by the Selim under the first Ottoman. The second reason is that America also defeated our other enemy, which was the Taliban in Afghanistan."

They did this—and this is a serious conversation—without asking the Iranians. This chap would say, "Not one contribution in blood or in money."

Does this matter? When the Iranians come and talk about the [Mosaddegh operation](#), why don't we reply, "Dear Iranians, in 1946-47, you would have lost a great piece of land to the Soviet Union if the UK and the U.S. would not have been there to help you." Why don't we speak of the facts instead of chatting about electoral processes?

Tell me, do these things matter anywhere?

FLYNT LEVERETT: Listening to you talk about this Iranian official in 2005, I just can't help but want to answer it like [Stephen Colbert](#): You're welcome.

HILLARY MANN LEVERETT: Again, Nixon and Kissinger's insight with China was that they met 136 times. They catalogued those negotiations. We tried to do some of that here. In each of these negotiations, the United States essentially pockets what it can and brings the two countries closer to the brink of conflict. It's not just that we have had these negotiations with the Islamic Republic, but after each of them, we're so embarrassed that we talked to them, we sanction them more and bring both countries closer to the brink of conflict.

I think, unfortunately, facts do seem to matter, but the embarrassment that we have actually leads us even further toward war. Our big argument is: Get out of this. Don't sit there and talk anymore. That actually makes things worse. There has to be this fundamental acceptance.

The other piece that I think is new and interesting to the debate that we bring out in our book gets to this idea: Why did the United States essentially hand Iraq and Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran on a silver platter? That gets to what we have tried to argue in the book are pathologies in American political culture, both on the Democratic side and the Republican side, that lead us to

constantly believe people that tell us that things are going to be the way that we want, that people really want to be like Americans deep down inside, and that as long as we go with enough tanks and enough drones or whatever the armament is of the day, somehow this situation is going to come in our favor.

That is a delusion. What we argue is that we need to break out of that delusion, accept facts as they are, not just in the Islamic Republic; we're going to be dealing with these issues in Egypt—pillars of American national security strategy for the last generation. If we don't get it right with the Islamic Republic, we're lost across the region.

DAVID SPEEDIE: What else can I say, other than thank you to both Hillary Mann and Flynt Leverett and the audience for a terrific session.

FLYNT LEVERETT: Thanks to all of you.

Audio

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Video Clip

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