

America and Iran: Flawed Analysis, Missed Opportunities, and Looming Dangers

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THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN have been bitter enemies for 30 years. The two nations came close to war over the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979, fought an undeclared naval war in the Persian Gulf a decade later, almost clashed again in the 1990s, and are again on the brink of conflict today. They support rivals across the Middle East and South Asia and engage in vitriolic public antagonism. No country has been sanctioned more by the U.S. Congress in recent decades than Iran, and none has been as vilified by politicians on both sides of the aisle. No country has been the subject of more rhetoric at Friday prayers in Iran than the Great Satan.

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For 30 years, the United States has tried to deal with Iran and its revolutionary ideology without a well grounded understanding of what motivates and inspires Iranians, or why most believe their revolution was a great turning point in their country's history, the history of Islam, and one of the truly decisive events of the 20th century. With a weak and erratic understanding of the dynamics of Iranian politics, history and culture, U.S. presidents have lurched from one failure to another in trying to deal with Iran. In the last 30 years, they have dealt, or *misdealt*, with Iran more than any other foreign policy issue. All too often, American leaders have relied on the warped views of third parties with their own agendas—either enemies in the region or exiles—that have misled American policymakers. This article will review this sad history, much of which I witnessed firsthand at the CIA and the White House, and then it will make a recommendation on how the next president ought to proceed.

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THE REVOLUTION AND HOSTAGES

Former President James Carter probably lost his bid for re-election in 1980 due to his handling of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the ensuing embassy crisis. All seemed well at the start of his administration and during his first and only visit to Tehran in 1978, when he famously called it an “island of stability” in the turbulent Middle East. The U.S. Embassy, the State Department, and the CIA failed to see what was coming until too late, even denying that Iran was in a “pre-revolutionary stage” in an unpublished National Intelligence Estimate in the summer of 1978. Gary Sick, Carter’s Iran specialist in the National Security Council, puts it best: “No one had it right...Other major countries with substantial interests in Iran—Great Britain, France, and Israel—performed no better. The evidence suggests that we are poorly equipped to deal with revolutionary societies, and when religion is added to revolution, we are paralyzed.”¹

The U.S. government was not well equipped to deal with the phenomenon of an Islamic revolution—especially one centered in the unique and peculiar world of Iran’s Shiite Islam, which has many idiosyncratic aspects. To understand the politics of the Shiite revolution requires an intimate study of the role of Shiism in Iran and the struggle within Shiism between various Ayatollahs with different responses to modernity, as well as the Shiite response to the Shah’s attempts to change his country overnight into a “new Sweden.”

In 1978 the CIA was particularly ill prepared to deal with the challenge, as its focus was on the communist threat from the Tudeh Party and the Soviet espionage problem. As Gary Sick notes, “U.S. intelligence in Iran was focused almost exclusively on the U.S.S.R...it had been many years since the CIA had had the kind of contacts within the opposition to the Shah that would have permitted it to influence the course of events.”²

In November 1978, as the Shah’s regime teetered, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner set up the Iran Task Force to better analyze the situation in Iran. A relatively new analyst at the CIA, I was among the new team assigned the task. My education at Harvard had included study in Islamic history and contemporary Iranian political thought, especially the works of Ali Shariati, one of the ideological fathers of the revolution. The new Task Force rapidly concluded that the Shah’s days were over, and the new regime would be dominated by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Carter administration’s decision to allow the ill Shah to come to the United States for cancer treatment led to the debacle of the embassy takeover and the 444 days of the hostages’ ordeal. It was a classic example of misunderstanding how strongly the Iranians would react. Carter made that decision despite warnings from the intelligence community that bringing the Shah to the United States would spark an attack on the

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U.S. embassy. As his chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, has ironically noted, Carter was persuaded to do so only after both his Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski argued strenuously in favor of letting the Shah into the United States. In Jordan's account, a deeply reluctant Carter agreed to let the Shah come enter the country after their strenuous pressure. The president then said to his two top foreign policy aides, "What are you guys going to advise me if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?"³ Carter would regret not listening to his own counsel.

The greatest enigma was the Ayatollah Khomeini himself. He was a character like nothing the U.S. national security bureaucracy had ever dealt with before. His asceticism and piety were totally alien to a secular United States. When Time magazine named Khomeini its Man of the Year in 1980, it noted that he had "spent most of his life in obscurity, [and] he was an enigma even to many" Iranians, let alone Americans.⁴ DCI Turner notes that the CIA's biggest mistake was to underestimate his power. We "didn't foresee that all the opposition groups in Iran would coalesce around a 79-year-old cleric then in exile in France."⁵ I drafted one of the first in-depth portraits of Khomeini for the U.S. government, which concluded that he was his own master, yet readers kept asking for information on his relations with Moscow, looking for a hidden KGB hand where none existed.

The CIA did better predicting the next great event in Iran's history: the Iraqi invasion. Throughout the spring and summer of 1980, the intelligence community monitored the steadily deteriorating relationship between Tehran and Baghdad. Ironically, Iraq had harbored Khomeini for two decades and given him a platform to secretly smuggle his message into imperial Iran from the holy city of Najaf. If any intelligence service was totally confused about the situation in Iran, it was the Iraqis. They had helped create the fire, and then, on its eve, they expelled the arsonist Khomeini to Paris, antagonizing their soon-to-be neighbor, and giving Khomeini a far better vantage point to achieve his dream. In September 1980, Turner issued an "Alert Memorandum" to the White House warning that the border clashes were about to produce an Iraqi invasion and that such an invasion "would involve Iraq in a costly and protracted struggle with Iran."⁶

THE IRAN–IRAQ WAR AND HOSTAGES REDUX

The eight-year Iran–Iraq war would be the largest conventional war of modern times, with over one million casualties, and would be the defining event of the Islamic Republic's early history. Dealing with the war, and especially with Khomeini's Iran, would

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almost destroy the presidency of Carter's successor Ronald Reagan. The Iran-Contra scandal, as it was called, would again demonstrate again the United States' inability to see inside the Iranian enigma and the ease with which third parties could manipulate a gullible president who wanted to find a way to better relations with Tehran.

Reagan was spared the embassy hostage drama—which ended as he was inaugurated—only to be ensnared in another hostage ordeal in Lebanon. Iranian-directed terrorists from Hezbollah had seized Americans in Beirut to trade for the relatives of Hezbollah members held in Kuwait. The organizer of the hostage ordeal was Imad Mughniyah, whose cousin was held for trying to assassinate the Kuwaiti Emir. Reagan was obsessed with freeing the hostages, and another task force was created in the CIA by Director Bill Casey. My job was to understand the group holding the captors, Islamic Jihad, a shadowy cover for Hezbollah.

The Reagan White House was approached by a combination of Iranian exiles and Israelis, both in government and out, who argued that they could open a line of communication to Tehran, strengthen “moderates” there, and get the hostages home if U.S. and Israeli weapons were offered. They seemed never to have understood that they were only increasing the value of the hostages; for every hostage released for an arms shipment, another prisoner was taken. As Casey's biographer has noted, “What Casey and the rest of the supporting Reagan cast were all guilty of was monumental gullibility.”⁷

George H.W. Bush and his National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft learned the lesson and crafted a more careful policy that emphasized a willingness to talk to Tehran with a behind-the-scenes effort to release the hostages. A skilled and brave UN emissary, Gianni Picco, was used for Iran and Mughniyah. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait freed Mughniyah's relatives inadvertently and removed the *casus belli*. Picco worked between Washington, Beirut, Damascus and Tehran, and he finally secured the release of all the Americans. Bush honored Picco and the hostages in the Rose Garden.⁸ At the strategic level, Bush defeated Iran's Iraqi enemy Saddam Hussein without strengthening Iran's influence in Iraq or the Gulf, a trick his son would not be able to replicate.

KHOBAR AND KHATAMI

Ten years ago, relations between the United States and Iran were at a low point, even by the standards of the last three decades. After a brief flurry of hope in the winter of 1991–1992 when the U.S. hostages came home from Lebanon, the relationship steadily deteriorated. Iran inspired and controlled acts of terror in Europe, the Middle East, and South America that had resulted in more U.S. sanctions and containment.

On 25 June 1996, a massive truck bomb destroyed the Khobar barracks in Dhah-

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ran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 U.S. Air Force personnel and wounding dozens more. Almost immediately, speculation began that Iran had a role in the bombing. At the time I was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Near East and South Asia and arrived on the scene at Khobar less than 18 hours after the explosion. The scene was appalling; even my escort officer was among the wounded. A few days later in the royal palace, I met with the Saudi Ambassador who tentatively pointed the finger of blame across the Persian Gulf. Very soon after the attack, the Pentagon began seriously thinking about retaliation once the evidence established who was responsible.⁹

By early 1997, the risks of conflict between the United States and Iran were serious and the relationship was in a deep hole. The intelligence services of the two countries were engaged in an intense spy-versus-spy battle around the world. Contingency planning was well underway in the Pentagon for military action. President Clinton's re-election seemed to augur another four years of tension and perhaps much worse. Hawks were pressing for military action.

The election of Mohammad Khatami on 23 May 1997 changed the direction of events profoundly and offered a chance for even more fundamental changes. Khatami won in a surprise landslide, gaining more than 20 million votes out of the 29 million votes cast. No one in the U.S. government, including the CIA, had expected a victory on this scale. The election of Khatami was seen in Iran and abroad as a vote for change inside Iran and for a new tone in Iran's relations with the outside world, including the United States.

President Clinton was among the first to see a new opportunity and to try to grasp it. That spring, I had moved over to the White House to work for him as a Special Assistant and Senior Director in the National Security Council staff. The President believed—and I shared his view—that the estrangement between the United States and Iran was in neither country's interest and that Khatami was the best chance in a quarter century to end the estrangement.

But the legacy of the past could not be easily dismissed, especially the Khobar investigation. As time went along, evidence of Iranian involvement mounted. It looked increasingly likely that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had been involved in the planning and that the bomb maker was a member of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, probably dispatched by Mughniyah.¹⁰

While the investigation continued—as did military planning—Clinton looked for an opening to begin direct talks with Tehran. Diplomatic relations had been severed in 1979 after the seizure of U.S. diplomats in our embassy. Normal communications were not available. All messages between our two governments went through the Swiss government, the only official intermediary to which both sides agreed. Clinton sent a message via the Swiss urging the establishment of a direct face-to-face diplomatic

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channel, and naming the U.S. representatives. Tehran replied “not yet.”

In January 1998, Khatami took the initiative in a daring new way in an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour. He spoke of the need for a dialogue of civilizations and of ending estrangement, and he spoke highly of the United States’ history of freedom. The next month, the CNN interview was followed by the first visit of a U.S. sports team to Tehran in decades and a visit by young Iranian wrestlers to the Oval Office in March 1998. It was a strange scene in the Oval Office; the wrestlers were being honored not for their sporting prowess but for the venue they played in. The door seemed to be gradually opening to an end to hostility. In May 1998 Vice President Gore traveled to the region and asked Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah to send a message to Khatami from Clinton that repeated the offer to open a direct face-to-face dialogue. The Crown Prince was happy to help.

In the end, the millennium would end without a breakthrough or the creation of a direct channel of official communications. In Tehran, Khatami was under fire for moving too fast and too far on reforms. The old guard of the revolution resisted relations with the United States, and Khatami was reluctant to force the issue. In Washington, Clinton had his own domestic difficulties and distractions and the specter of Khobar constantly complicated matters.

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Clinton never stopped trying to open the door, using other intermediaries, such as the Sultan of Oman and the UN Secretary General, to signal Tehran of his interest in talks. I carried a message on President Clinton’s behalf to Sultan Qabus for him to pass to President Khatami. Clinton was seeking some formula to deal with the Khobar incident, to end Revolutionary Guard–Hezbollah terror, and to start a new page in U.S.-Iranian relations. Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk and I delivered the message to the Sultan at his residence in Fontaine de la Port, France.¹¹ But the message became a weapon in the battle between Khatami and the hardliners. Khatami could not bring those responsible for Khobar to justice—they were the very same hardliners who fought him on every issue. The answer was negative.

Yet by the end of the 1990s, the relationship had been transformed from what it was in the middle of the decade. There was still no formal communication between the two governments, but people-to-people exchanges were flourishing and sanctions had eased. The new millennium seemed to promise much.

9/11 AND NEW OPPORTUNITY

President George W. Bush’s new administration could have picked up where Clinton and Khatami left off. But the Bush team was not a team—rather, it was composed of two rival factions. One faction sought engagement like Clinton, and another sought

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regime change in Baghdad and Tehran. In the end, the second faction got its way, at least in Baghdad, starting a war we did not need to fight, and then fighting it ineptly.

But before those events, the Bush team had a real chance at changing the nature of U.S.-Iranian relations. First, it seemed to resolve Khobar with a simple ending, allowing the outgoing FBI Director to indict the Saudi Shiites most directly responsible for the crime without any prospect of bringing them to justice. Iran and Hezbollah were mentioned in the indictment but no Iranian officials were named or indicted. The Khobar issue was buried and forgotten.

Then the 11 September attacks opened the door to a new era. Iranians shared the world's horror at al-Qaeda's evil and tacitly supported the U.S. intervention against the Taliban in Afghanistan. For Iran, this was simple. It had almost gone to war with the Taliban in 1998 and was a long time supporter of the Northern Alliance, the Afghan opposition group who fought the Taliban. When the first CIA team arrived in the Panjsher Valley in October 2001 to start the liberation of Kabul, they found that Iranian Revolutionary Guards were already there and working against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.¹²

U.S. and Iranian diplomats came together in Bonn to build a post-war Afghan government. By all accounts, they exceeded their formal instructions and decided on the spot to work together. This wisdom helped to create not just a new Afghanistan from the ashes of a quarter century of war, but it also began the only sustained period of U.S.-Iranian diplomatic communication and cooperation in 30 years.¹³

The talks even survived President Bush's unfortunate and ill-timed "axis of evil" speech in January 2002. For a time, the conversations went beyond just Afghanistan to include the global fight against al-Qaeda and the complications inherent in Bush's Mesopotamian adventure.

Iran was happy to see the end of its nemesis, Saddam Hussein, the man who—with U.S. help—had waged the longest and most bloody conventional war of our time against Iran. Iranians were delighted to see the United States defeat an enemy that had cost tens of thousands of Iranian lives in a war that was very much the defining experience for most middle-aged Iranians today. But they were clearly not enthused by the braggadocio that followed the fall of Baghdad when some in Washington spoke of marching to Tehran next.

At this time, Tehran apparently suggested another diplomatic opening, an expansion of the agenda for diplomacy to all the issues that Iran and the United States disagreed about. This included the nuclear weapons issue and the future of Israeli-Arab relations. According to the National Intelligence Estimate released in late 2007, Iran

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apparently also halted work on its clandestine nuclear weapons program at the same time. We still know too little about this opening. Although it seems to have been serious, obviously came to nothing.¹⁴

By 2005, Khatami's time was coming to an end. A new Iranian President would be elected: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The chance for rapprochement was lost. A new and more dangerous era began.

The only contact since Ahmadinejad's election has been the discussions in Baghdad between our respective ambassadors over the future of Iraq, talks that the Iraqi government initiated over Washington's deep reservations. Those talks represent something important, however. Since its only two supporters are Iran and the United States, the Iraqi government in Baghdad that we helped create is literally between a rock and a hard place. If stability is ever going to come to Iraq, it needs the United States and Iran to cooperate. Increasingly, Iraq has moved closer to Iran. The triumphal visit of Ahmadinejad to Baghdad in March 2008, where he signed new trade deals, approved US\$1 billion in new loans, and ridiculed Bush for visiting Baghdad in secret while he came in public, underscored Iran's gains in Iraq. All that was missing was a "Mission Accomplished" banner.

And we have seen a lot of heat in the last year. President Ahmadinejad has contributed a great deal of it with his dangerous calls for an end to Israel and a world without Zionism, his irresponsible challenges to the history of the Holocaust, and his saber rattling. Bush has added to the heat with threats that Iran's nuclear program will lead to a third world war.

Behind the rhetoric is an even more dangerous reality. According to U.S. and U.K. officials, Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah are now supporting Shiite warlords in Iraq with expertise, arms, and advisors who are directly attacking and killing U.S. and British soldiers. Even more troublesome are reports that Iran is providing aid to the Taliban in Afghanistan against NATO troops. This is a striking reversal since only a decade ago Iran and the Taliban were on the edge of war. If true, it suggests Iran is leaning very far forward to hit the United States and its allies. These reports have been received with a great deal of skepticism both in the United States and abroad, a reflection of the loss of faith in our intelligence community that has been the result of the President's blatant politicization of its product.

But if the reports are true, they may reflect a new sense in Tehran that the United States' time in the Middle East and South Asia is coming to an end and that it should be ended with a violent and ugly punctuation mark. In other words, Iran may want to see the United States not just leave Iraq and Afghanistan—thus ending any danger that our troops will be used to support attacks on Iran—but it wants to see us leave battered, bruised, and gun shy, never to return. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini

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has reportedly said that the United States in Iraq is like a wolf caught in a trap—it can either bleed to death or gnaw off its foot. Either outcome is painful.

The nuclear issue adds to the danger. The passage of three UN Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran is a major development that has put Iran on the diplomatic defensive. There is an international consensus now against Iran developing a full fuel cycle and, potentially, the bomb. Critics have suggested that the sanctions lack real teeth and there is some truth to this, but from Tehran's perspective, they are still an ominous sign of what may be coming next. Tensions between the Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, and New York are creating a very dangerous cocktail.

One more manifestation of this deadly brew is the crackdown now underway in Iran of all kinds of dissent, real and imaginary. The Ahmadinejad regime has jailed many opponents and accused innocent scholars engaged in academic exchanges of treason. Paranoia seems to be running rampant in Tehran alongside hubris and overconfidence.

THE FUTURE ALTERNATIVE

The situation is clearly dire. I offer six suggestions for how to proceed. First, we should clearly recognize how awful the military option is and what a catastrophe war would be for the United States, Iran, and the Middle East as a whole. To imagine war with Iran, use as the template not the Israeli air strike on Osirak in 1981, but the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon with hundreds of clashes, dozens of air strikes and extended salvos of missiles and rockets—close to 4,000 in the end—into Israel's cities, especially Haifa. Yet, a war with Iran would not be fought in the relatively small space of the Galilee. It would be fought across the whole of the Middle East from Lebanon to the Khyber Pass. Iran would have every incentive to strike U.S. targets across the region with missiles, terrorists, and insurgents. At the Brookings Institution, a war game on this scenario conducted in the spring of 2008 demonstrated that any U.S.–Iran confrontation would rapidly spread throughout the Middle East and South Asia.

An early casualty would be the Maliki government in Iraq, which could not afford to choose between its two most important sponsors. The Shiite street in Iraq would go with Iran, as would the Shiite warlords Iran has supported there for years. Once again the Kurds would be in a hard place, torn between the United States and Iran. Whether the Karzai government in Kabul could survive is also open to question. So the United States would find the twin insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan burning more intensely while it struggled to destroy targets deep inside Iran. In response, Iran would retaliate with terror on a global scale. And once the fireworks begin to settle down, what then? Do we try to occupy Iran? This is not an option that serious policy makers should spend

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much time considering. When we looked at it in the Clinton administration—after Khobar and long before the Iraq war—it was wisely rejected.

Second, we should take a look at our own rhetoric. Calm voices and frank assessments are better than heavy breathing and threats. Passing resolutions in the U.S. Congress for play at home is not a policy. Let Mr. Ahmadinejad have the floor—he will only dig a deeper hole if we let him do the talking. Keep the focus on their misdeeds, not our misspoken words. Support academic exchanges and two-track diplomacy quietly, not as a stalking horse for regime change.

Third, we should keep the focus on diplomacy. The Security Council is the right place to take our concerns about Iran's nuclear program and would be a good place to take issues like Iraq and Afghanistan. The State Department deserves credit for the hard work it did to get those UN resolutions passed. The task ahead should be a patient, gradual ratcheting up of the pressure on Iran while maintaining the consensus of the permanent members of the council. Maintaining this unity is the key, and it is more important to keep unity than to pass any specific sanction. This will not be easy, but the rewards are considerable. The extremists in Iran will lose their ability to claim that there is nothing the United States can do to Iran. The focus of any sanctions should be carefully targeted to go after those most responsible for the problem, especially the Guards force itself and the Iranian intelligence apparatus.

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Fourth, we must look to the long-term play. This is not an issue that will be resolved quickly, and we should not think of it in those terms. Iran will have new elections in 2009 and that will bring some changes. The Supreme Leader is not immortal and his passing will bring change. No one can predict where those changes may lead today, but an Iran that can go from Khatami to Ahmadinejad can and will change again.

Fifth, we need to put Iran policy inside our broader post-9/11 global strategy. Iran is an enemy of our greatest foe, al-Qaeda, and we need to be creative in thinking about how to make sure our Iran policy fits into our approach to destroying al-Qaeda.

Finally, it is in the United States's interest to bring Iran back into the community of nations and to renew a direct dialogue with Tehran. Iran is simply too important to be estranged from permanently. Thirty years is long enough. We should renew the offer that President Bush's father wisely put on the table in 1989: good will begets good will. The United States should be ready to sit down with Iran anytime, anywhere to discuss all the issues that divide us. We should offer talks in Baghdad, Kabul and wherever we may clash, and we should open a hotline in the Gulf between our navies to prevent dangerous incidents at sea. Diplomacy is not a sign of weakness; it is the mechanism by which states resolve the issues that divide them. As Winston Churchill famously put it, "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war." 

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NOTES

1. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), viii.
2. Ibid., 346.
3. Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 32.
4. George Church, "Man of the Year: Portrait of an Ascetic Despot Ayatollah Khomeini," *Time*, 7 January 1980, 22.
5. Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 115.
6. An Alert Memorandum was the top warning document of the intelligence community at the time. The September 1980 memo has been partly declassified and released as "CIA-RDP81B00401R000500050003-2, Alert Memorandum Iran-Iraq," Approved for Release 22 January 2004.
7. Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 563.
8. Giandomenico Picco, *Man Without a Gun: One Diplomat's Secret Struggle to Free the Hostages, Fight Terrorism and End a War* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 266–267.
9. Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: the Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 282–284.
10. The best account of the Khobar incident is the indictment delivered in Alexandria, VA in June 2001 (US v. Al-Mughassil, et al., criminal case no. 01-228-A), <http://fl1.findlaw.com/news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/khobar/khobarindict61901.pdf>.
11. Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, The U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 188–191. The changing nature of Iranian foreign policy is also put in historical perspective in R. K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 549–559.
12. Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 112. Schroen led the first CIA team into Afghanistan after 9/11 and reports that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was already there.
13. Ambassador Jim Dobbins has given a noteworthy account of this process. See James Dobbins, "Time to Deal with Iran," *Washington Post*, 6 May 2004.
14. Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, 204–206.

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