



Re-establishing a U.S.

Diplomatic Presence in Iran: Advancing U.S. National Security and Serving American Citizens

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Reestablishing a U.S. Diplomatic Presence in Iran: *Advancing U.S. National Security and Serving American Citizens*

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A blue-tinted photograph of a cityscape with a prominent snow-capped mountain peak in the background. The mountain is the central focus, with a city skyline visible in the foreground and middle ground. The sky is overcast and blue. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

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About PAAIA

The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, PAAIA INC., is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonreligious 501(c)(4) membership organization that serves the domestic interests of Iranian Americans and represents the community before U.S. policymakers and the American public at large. PAAIA works to foster greater understanding of our community and its cultural heritage and to expand opportunities for the active participation of Iranian Americans in the democratic process at all levels of government.

PAAIA's mission is to:

- Unite the Iranian American community and have its voice heard.
- Celebrate who we are and pass our heritage to future generations.
- Give back to America as it has given to us.

PAAIA also strives to be the credible voice of the Iranian American community in the U.S. By aggregating and using scientific, statistically accurate, and well researched data, we provide outreach and education to law makers, policy makers, legislatures, and the general public regarding the views of the Iranian American community, our needs and issues. In tandem, we provide education to our community about the ways they can impact the policy decisions that are made. Collaboratively, through the use of various media, resources, and tools, we aim to be the non-agenda driven and objective voice of our community in the U.S.

About This Report

This report, authored by Ramin Asgard, a former Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State, makes the case for re-establishing a U.S. official diplomatic presence in Iran. It will briefly explore the historic background contributing to the current lack of U.S. official presence in Iran, highlight the importance of an official U.S. presence to the Iranian American community, and outline the reasons why an official U.S. presence is in America's national security interest. In addition, the report explores the opposition, risks, and obstacles involved in re-establishing such a presence, offers a notional timeline and description of how an initial official U.S. presence in Iran could be re-established, and highlights lessons from U.S. diplomatic history as to how and why such a process might unfold.

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The United States of America and Iran first established bilateral ties through a Treaty of Commerce and Navigation in 1856, and several noteworthy Americans visited Iran as advisors, missionaries, and tourists during the 19th century. Iran dispatched its first Ambassador to the United States in 1856. Full bilateral relations began in 1944, with the exchange of Ambassadors.

Bilateral relations after World War II went through various phases, and a detailed description of this period is beyond the scope of this paper. But observers generally agree that the U.S. and Iran enjoyed close bilateral ties during this period. This relationship changed dramatically, however, with the advent of the Islamic Revolution, which swept Iran from 1978-1979, and altered virtually every aspect of these long established ties.

On April 7, 1980 the U.S. severed diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Relations had declined during the Islamic Revolution that led to the fall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to a combination of Islamists, leftists, and secular nationalist forces led by Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini. But it was the traumatic 444-day U.S. Embassy hostage crisis that ultimately led to the severing of relations between the two countries.

Despite anti-U.S. rhetoric by the Iranian opposition to the Shah during the latter part of his rule, after the revolution succeeded, the new Provisional Government of Iran initially sought to maintain diplomatic ties with the U.S. Nonetheless, Iran threatened U.S. interests in Iran if the U.S. government admitted the terminally ill Shah for medical treatment. But even after the Shah was admitted to the U.S., the Provisional Government (consisting primarily of nationalists and religious intellectuals) still tried to salvage ties with the U.S.

However, on November 4, 1979, a group of radical students seized the U.S. Embassy compound, taking the American staff hostage and forcing events down a long, tragic path. Khomeini and the provisional government, for various reasons, eventually formally supported the seizure.¹ Many members of the provisional government resigned in protest, and America soon announced the formal breaking of diplomatic ties.

America's relations with Iran have never recovered, and the losses to American and Iranian interests as a result of this estrangement have been enormous. In the case of America, the loss of a diplomatic presence in a strategically vital country has severely limited its ability to understand and influence events in Iran and the region –

thereby damaging its long-term national security interests. In addition, those perhaps most directly impacted by the estrangement, Iranian Americans, have endured isolation and hardship as the two countries that represent their home and their heritage have remained at odds. This paper will explore whether it may now be time to consider reestablishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran.



AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC PRESENCE IN IRAN

During the past 34 years, the absence of any U.S. diplomatic presence has hampered America's ability to understand and successfully impact events related to Iran, not to mention the greater Middle East.

Without a diplomatic presence helping to inform policy formulation and execution, America's Iran policy over recent decades has instead been cobbled together through a combination of think-tank and intelligence analysis, political and economic reporting from third countries, input from allies, pressure from domestic political influence groups, self-appointed Iranian intermediaries with divergent motives, official rhetoric, and media narratives. This chaotic, supercharged, and highly politicized climate of modern U.S.-Iran relations has often resembled a Hobbesian "state of nature",ⁱⁱ and has generally led to disjointed, often contradictory, and consistently suboptimal, policy outcomes.

This state of nature, created in large part by the lack of an official U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran, has resulted in a lack of a locus of policy discipline in America's Iran policy, directly decreasing America's ability to advance its foreign policy goals. That locus of policy discipline – where the foreign policy goals of the U.S. meet the ground realities of

countries abroad – generally functions through a U.S. diplomatic presence and the work of an Ambassador/Principal Officer and his/her country team in an overseas capital.ⁱⁱⁱ Assessing and reporting on realities on the ground, effectively engaging key actors, servicing U.S. citizens, facilitating travel to the U.S., presenting U.S. positions in the local media, supporting cultural engagement, and generally advancing U.S. foreign policy goals professionally through accredited diplomats, is the standard and most effective means for securing U.S. national interests in foreign countries. Iran should be no exception.

While advancing America's foreign policy objectives involving Iran would be enhanced through an official U.S. presence, it is also readily apparent that 34 years of limited progress on virtually all issues of bilateral concern have proven that the state of nature approach needs to change. The most effective way to authoritatively advance this change is, once again, through a re-established U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran.

Benefits of a U.S. Diplomatic Presence in Iran

Some of the specific benefits of this renewed U.S. diplomatic presence include the following:

Direct Engagement with the Iranian Government on Issues of High Importance to U.S. National Security

Even a limited U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran would afford the U.S. government some direct access to Iranian government officials. This will enable regular diplomatic engagement on key bilateral issues through standard diplomatic protocol. This, however, does not mean that the U.S. government accepts or endorses Iranian government policies, or even constitutes a resumption of full diplomatic relations, which would require several additional steps.

Greatly Enhanced American Citizen Services

Significant numbers of Americans, including a large contingent of Iranian Americans, visit and, in some cases, reside in Iran. These American citizens, as well as Iranians who are U.S. Legal Permanent Residents, will greatly benefit from expanded U.S. consular support while inside Iran. One of a U.S. embassy or consulate's highest priority responsibilities is American Citizen Services (ACS). ACS sections provide U.S. citizens (and in some cases Legal Permanent Residents) abroad with a wide variety of services including:

- ◆ U.S. Passport issuance, renewal and amendment services
- ◆ Registration of U.S. citizens in Iran
- ◆ Security Advisory support to U.S. citizens
- ◆ Reports of Birth Abroad for children of U.S. citizens residing abroad
- ◆ Social Security check distribution, registration
- ◆ Voter registration
- ◆ Federal income tax information and filing support

- ◆ Consular visitation and support for Americans arrested, detained or imprisoned abroad
- ◆ Welfare & Whereabouts case support for Americans reported missing
- ◆ Death registration and support for Americans passing away overseas and their families

In addition, while not a standard ACS function, the Tehran ACS section – possibly working through the Economic Officer or other relevant offices – could also help provide Americans relevant guidance on proper compliance with existing economic sanctions regulations.

Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Visa Services

Consular sections also provide a range of Immigrant (leading to U.S. permanent residence) and Nonimmigrant (for temporary visits such as for tourists, students, exchange visitors) visa services. With appropriate security screening and safeguards in place, these visas allow legal temporary travel or immigration to the U.S. for qualified Iranians.

Public Affairs Section

This section would engage local media to help advance and explain U.S. policy positions and support U.S.-Iran academic and cultural exchange programs.

Political/Economic Section

The political/economic section would provide political and economic reporting on conditions in Iran. While this function's activities would be limited by its small size – perhaps only one or two officers – at the outset, having a realistic picture of developments in Iran, and a platform for engaging the Iranian government at the

working level, will offer U.S. policymakers the best channel in decades to effectively understand and impact developments in Iran.

The Legacy of 1979 and the Iranian American Community

The large and vibrant Iranian American community continues to feel the costs of the long U.S.-Iran estrangement acutely, particularly the absence of an official U.S. presence in Iran. As a result, many in the community are unable to travel securely to Iran, as they have very limited diplomatic and consular support services available to ensure their safety and welfare. Further, as Iran does not recognize their U.S. citizenship, they must travel on Iranian passports, rendering them fully subject to Iranian law when in Iran. Moreover, strained bilateral ties means the Iranian government views many Iranian Americans (as well as many other Americans) visiting Iran with suspicion.

In some cases, this tenuous situation has even led to the detention and/or imprisonment of U.S. citizens of Iranian descent, sometimes for months or years, without effective access to U.S. government support. In the 2000s, several prominent Iranian Americans visiting Iran were arrested and held for extended periods, further discouraging some in the community from visiting the country of their birth or heritage. Many other Americans and Iranian Americans visiting Iran have faced similar difficult circumstances.

Family members of Iranian Americans attempting to visit from Iran have also faced significant challenges, including the costly and highly unpredictable U.S. visa application process. Clearly, U.S. national security considerations are a top priority, and therefore careful and sometimes demanding screening procedures are necessary and understandable, particularly in light of the legacy of 9/11 and its impact on U.S. visa

security procedures.^{iv} Nonetheless, according to many first-hand accounts, the visa application and issuance process for Iranians can be exhausting, complex, expensive, and dehumanizing. But in reality, much of the hardship facing Iranian visa applicants is not caused by difficult visa screening procedures, but because they lack a home country U.S. diplomatic presence where they can conduct visa interviews.

The U.S. Department of State makes every effort to address the needs of U.S. citizens traveling to Iran, and to provide visa services to Iranians planning travel to the U.S. But there is only so much State can effectively do without U.S. personnel in Iran.^v

Iranian American relatives of these visa applicants in the U.S. share these hardships and strongly support addressing this situation through any means that would simplify the visa process and also provide an increased degree of security and access for U.S. citizens visiting Iran. Establishing an American-staffed U.S. Interests Section in Tehran is the most effective way to conclusively address these issues.^{vi}

A survey of the Iranian American community conducted by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) in 2011 supports this assertion. According to the survey, a large majority (73%) of those surveyed supported the establishment of a U.S. Interests Section in Iran that would provide consular services and issue U.S. visas. This Interests Section would not, however, constitute the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. By comparison, 84% of those surveyed in 2008 cited their support for the establishment of such an Interests Section.^{vii}

Opposition, Risks and Obstacles

There is no question that re-establishing even a limited U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran is a significant step and faces opposition, risks, and obstacles. Many of those long accustomed to life in the state of nature may oppose this major development as a threat to established narratives and widely held and carefully cultivated shibboleths and taboos. Among these narratives are those that have been used to argue against this measure in the past. The following are a representative sample:

“Rewarding Bad Behavior”

Critics of re-establishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran have suggested that such a step “rewards” the Iranian government, a government with a lengthy history of anti-U.S. rhetoric, policies and activities. According to this line of thinking, Iran certainly does not deserve this overture. However, asking whether the Iranian government deserves the reward of a U.S. diplomatic presence reflects a flawed perspective to a thoughtful consideration of this issue. The appropriate question to pose instead would be: “Does establishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran substantially enhance U.S. national security versus the status quo”?

To help answer this question, let us use a Cold War comparison. The United States did not recognize the new revolutionary government of the U.S.S.R. upon its founding in 1922. However, it maintained an official diplomatic presence in the Soviet Union from 1934 until the end of the Cold War. When diplomatic relations were established, the leader of the Soviet Union was Joseph Stalin, among the most brutal dictators of the 20th century. Soviet history during the Stalin era featured totalitarian rule, replete with purges, forced collectivization, mass starvation, and gulags. In later decades of the Cold War, successive

leaders of the U.S.S.R. led a global campaign against U.S. interests. At its peak, the U.S.S.R. maintained 7,000 intercontinental ballistic missiles aimed at the U.S. and a huge conventional military arrayed against U.S. allies and interests along the Central Front in Europe.

During this entire time, however, official diplomatic relations between the two countries continued. While one can perhaps make the argument that ties with the U.S.S.R. were necessary during the interwar and, particularly, the World War II period, why did America sustain full diplomatic ties with the U.S.S.R. during the Berlin Airlift, the Senate McCarthy hearings, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and so on? Cold War realities never led to a severing of diplomatic presence within the U.S.S.R., and America’s diplomatic presence in the country was never considered as bestowing a reward to a deserving nation. Simply put, the U.S. government concluded that maintaining these relations were extremely valuable to U.S. national security. A U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran should be considered based upon the same criteria.

“Iranian Government Will Refuse”

A second common assumption is that the Iranian government would not accept establishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran. There are two strains to this argument:

1) *The Iranian government still harbors so much suspicion of U.S. intentions that they would not allow the U.S. to reestablish a diplomatic presence in Iran.*

After all, revolutionary Iran labeled the U.S. Embassy the “den of spies” during and following the hostage crisis. So why would Iran want to allow the “den of spies” to be reestablished? The answer is simple.

Establishing an official U.S. presence is in Iran's national interest, especially in light of the country's efforts to rejoin the international community. In addition, Iran will reciprocally enjoy upgraded diplomatic presence in the U.S., thus ensuring that this is, by no means, a unilateral measure. Finally, while we are certainly a long way from strong mutual trust between the U.S. and Iran, the various overtures and productive contacts of the past several months have demonstrated a genuine desire to pragmatically move beyond the rhetoric and policies of the past.

2) *The Iranian government would never allow a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran because long lines of eager Iranians queuing up in Tehran to secure U.S. visas for travel to America, which the Iranian government has long labeled the "Great Satan", would deeply embarrass the Iranian government.*

These long lines would ostensibly represent a daily, highly visible popular rejection of three decades of Iranian government anti-U.S. rhetoric. But advances in technology and a shifting bilateral landscape may have rendered this objection moot. First, potential long lines and queues can be avoided by having visa applicants apply and schedule appointments online, as they do now through third country embassies and consulates. In addition, the Iranian government has arguably demonstrated that it is transitioning beyond anti-Americanism as a core principle of state identity. The recent direct and unprecedented communications at the presidential and secretary of state/foreign minister level between the U.S. and Iran are among the most salient examples of this fundamental change.

" Unacceptable Safety Risk"

A third theme is the great security risk posed to American diplomats posted to a U.S. diplomatic facility in Iran. Ostensibly, this

position is largely based upon fears stemming from the very real enduring legacy of the hostage crisis. But security considerations for American diplomatic posts are based on a number of factors, which have changed dramatically in recent years. Over the past decade, thousands of American diplomats (and other civilian official personnel) have served in critical threat postings including Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, etc., and in smaller numbers at Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in remote locations in multiple critical threat countries. These postings – which continue to this day – were and are in active war/conflict zones.

The security conditions in Tehran may present challenges. The still extant memories of the hostage crisis indeed linger. Nonetheless, the security conditions diplomats would face at a U.S. Interests Section in Tehran pale in comparison to the constant and severe risks associated with the types of deployments the Foreign Service and other civilians posted overseas have routinely faced over the past decade. Moreover, official civilian Americans serving in such postings – and this would be true for those serving in Tehran - fully understand and accept the associated risks and are generally well compensated for the hardships and dangers they face in such environments. These Americans, just as their brothers and sisters in the military, accept these risks to serve their country. A whole generation of such diplomats has adapted to service at high threat/hardship postings and, indeed, the State Department personnel system has encouraged such service. As such, protecting them during such deployments would always remain a top priority.

There is undeniably some risk that die-hard xenophobes or status quo stalwarts in Iran, threatened by losing their standing within a more open, less internationally isolated Iran, would seek to sabotage progress towards any

dramatic change to Iran's global orientation. Possibly no single measure represents a greater threat to these entrenched interests within Iran than the re-establishment of a U.S. diplomatic presence. With proper precautions overseen by the State Department's Diplomatic Security bureau (DS), however, the safety of official Americans can be secured within acceptable levels of risk. In addition, the Iranian government must explicitly agree to take every possible step to ensure the security of Americans posted to Iran before even one official American returns to Tehran. For the reasons outlined above, the safety and security issue is manageable well within current acceptable limits, particularly given the high national security priorities at stake.

“Betraying the Iranian Opposition”

From the early days of the Islamic Revolution, opponents of the ruling doctrines and practices of the Islamic Republic have protested its domestic policies. In particular, opposition activists both inside Iran and among the Iranian diaspora, joined by many international civil society groups and Western governments, have criticized Iran's human rights record. For example, the State Department Annual Human Rights Report and other reporting on Iran have consistently highlighted the shortfalls of Iran's human rights practices. Among those who oppose a resumption of U.S.-Iran diplomatic engagement are those who, based upon this record on human rights, consider any U.S. engagement with the current government of Iran as a “betrayal” of the victims of the Iranian government's human rights practices. The question to ask, however, is not whether Iran has serious issues in the area of human rights. That is self-evidently so. Rather, the question is whether the last 34 years in the state of nature – marked by diplomatic isolation, sanctions, sporadic regime change efforts and covert action – have markedly

improved human rights in Iran. Clearly, the answer is no.

For those who genuinely wish to see freer and more transparent governance in Iran, and thereby, an improved human rights situation, Iran's engagement with the world – and the U.S. in particular – will arguably do far more to advance these worthy goals than the status quo approaches have achieved thus far. A U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran would directly engage all sectors of Iranian society, including minorities, reformists, dissidents, journalists, scholars, and others. While the U.S. presence alone is certainly not sufficient to bring enduring domestic reforms to Iran – that is ultimately up to the Iranian people – it would assist the process far more effectively on the ground than through existing methods.

The Current Context Offers a Historic Opportunity

The election of pragmatist Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 was based upon a strong popular mandate. His early progress on the international diplomatic front enjoys the consolidated support of Supreme Leader Khamenei and the majority of Iran's power centers. The P5+1/Iran interim nuclear agreement of late November 2013 began implementation on January 20, 2014. Continued P5+1 negotiations with Iran offer the promise of an eventual diplomatic resolution to the pressing challenge of the Iran nuclear program. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have emphasized repeatedly that reaching a nuclear agreement is not certain, and that any U.S. concessions are incremental and reversible. Nonetheless, the process has made unprecedented progress so far.

The U.S. Congress and significant groups in the U.S. and internationally remain skeptical that a final P5+1/Iran agreement is possible. However, there is no question that a large

global consensus supports a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue, that progress towards a final agreement is realistically possible, and that resolving this issue without resort to military force is preferable. There is nothing about resuming a limited American diplomatic presence in Iran that would set back this progress. Rather, such a presence would actually bolster progress on nuclear negotiations and offer an ideal platform for ensuring successful implementation of an eventual long-term nuclear agreement, as well as for supporting other key U.S. bilateral and regional goals.



THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ENHANCING U.S. DIPLOMATIC CAPACITY IN IRAN

The following notional process is based upon standard diplomatic convention and practice. The exact procedure for the potential resumption of a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran, and a reciprocal resumed Iranian diplomatic presence in the U.S., is subject to the Obama administration's policy decisions, State Department policy and procedures, and Congressional oversight, as well as the policy decisions of the Iranian government. Any steps forward must be negotiated bilaterally and explicitly agreed upon before any measures beyond the current bilateral diplomatic arrangement can proceed. With these caveats in mind, below is how the process can generally unfold.

The Current U.S.- Iran Diplomatic Configuration

At present, the U.S. maintains an Interests Section under the supervision of the Swiss Embassy in Tehran. This interests section is staffed by a combination of Swiss diplomats and staff, as well as Iranian host country staff. The interests section performs limited American Citizen Services and very limited visa services. In addition, the Swiss serve as the intermediary for the exchange of diplomatic correspondence between the U.S.

and Iran. Meanwhile, Iran maintains an Interests Section through the Pakistani Embassy in Washington. This interests section is staffed by roughly a dozen Iranian Green Card holders and staff. In addition, Iran maintains a Permanent Representative's mission at the United Nations in New York. While the Permanent Representative carries the rank of Ambassador, his duties are limited by the restriction that neither he nor his staff may travel beyond the immediate environs of the U.N. without express authorization by the Department of State. Both Americans and Iranian Americans traveling to Iran obtain documents from the Iranian Interests Section in Washington while Iranians traveling to the U.S. have access to U.S. visa services through several U.S. diplomatic posts in third countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Armenia, where Persian-speaking consular officers with training in Iran affairs conduct visa interviews. In addition, the State Department's Virtual Embassy Tehran offers Persian language information resources online, including consular services information.

A Tehran U.S. Interests Section with American Diplomats

Should the U.S. and Iran agree, the U.S. could begin staffing the existing Interests Section in Tehran with American diplomatic personnel. To allow this initial step, the State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security, the Office of Overseas Building Operations, as well as representatives from other State Department offices, would first visit the Swiss Embassy U.S. Interests Section facility in Tehran to ensure it meets stringent State Department physical security standards. If it does not, the U.S. would need to obtain a more secure location. This inspection and property securing process should not require more than a few months.

Once the site, either at the existing location or at a new facility, is secured, State Department Foreign Service Officers and Specialists on Temporary Duty Assignments (TDYs) lasting 3-6 months will likely be the first to return to Tehran – probably in small numbers initially. At some point, if bilateral relations permit, and assuming no setbacks during the initial phase, foreign service officers and specialists posted to the U.S. Interests Section could be assigned on Permanent Change of Station (PCS) status, meaning that they would serve for one or more years in Tehran. As in other such cases, these early postings would most likely be unaccompanied (without spouses or children). The initial staffing priorities depend on a number of factors, but would, almost certainly, include those functions listed in the sidebar.^{viii}

Given the legacy of 1979, and the enduring rancor towards the U.S. among some political and commercial circles in Iran, security for the Interests Section and its staff would be a top priority. The Iranian government must, therefore, provide ironclad guarantees and reaffirm that it will adhere to the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular

Relations^{ix} as regards the U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran. In particular, it must adhere to the following provisions:

Article 22. The premises of a diplomatic mission, such as an embassy, are inviolate and must not be entered by the host country except by permission of the head of the mission. Furthermore, the host country must protect the mission from intrusion or damage. The host country must never search the premises, nor seize its documents or property. (Article 30 extends this provision to the private residence of the diplomats.)

Article 27. The host country must permit and protect free communication between the diplomats of the mission and their home country. A diplomatic bag must never be opened even on suspicion of abuse. A diplomatic courier must never be arrested or detained.

Article 29. Diplomats must not be liable to any form of arrest or detention. They are immune from civil or criminal prosecution, though the sending country may waive this right under Article 32.

A U.S. Liaison Office or Embassy

While this paper deals primarily with establishing an American staffed U.S. Interests Section, it is worth considering the next steps, should conditions permit, in upgrading U.S. presence in Iran. In such a case, the next step would probably be establishing a Liaison Office in Iran. A U.S. Liaison Office would serve as a larger U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran and would be directed by a more senior diplomat – most likely carrying the working title of Chargé d’Affaires. The Chargé could be resident or non-resident. Overall

American staff presence will likely also increase over that of the Interests Section. The Interests Section or Liaison Office arrangement could prevail for an interim period and could be downgraded or upgraded depending on bilateral developments. The next step following the establishment of a Liaison Office would be the resumption of full diplomatic relations through measures such as an exchange of Ambassadors and the opening of Embassies in Tehran and Washington.

STAFFING PRIORITIES FOR AN INITIAL U.S. DIPLOMATIC PRESENCE IN TEHRAN

A Principal Officer to direct operations and serve as primary liaison with the Iranian government.

One or more Consular Officers to perform American Citizen Services and at least some visa services.

One or more Regional Security Officers to ensure security of the facilities and staff.

One or more Public Affairs Officers to support U.S.-Iran exchange programs and respond to media inquiries.

One or more Information Management Specialists to establish and maintain information networks.

One or more Administrative/General Services Officers to establish and maintain housing, shipping, property allocation, travel, and personnel functions.

One or more Political/Economic Officers to follow on the ground developments in Iran.



Recent U.S. diplomatic history offers important insights on the process of resuming a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran. Specifically, examples from the U.S. presence in Cuba, Libya, USSR, Vietnam, and China, taken together, offer useful insights into this issue.

The U.S. severed relations with Cuba in 1961, then established an Interests Section in 1977 staffed with Americans, which continues its work until this day. The U.S. severed relations with Libya in 1981, then restored them after Libya renounced its nuclear program. Five years after restoring full diplomatic relations with Libya, the U.S. joined an international coalition in a war with that country. As noted earlier, the Soviet Union was dedicated to the destruction of the American way of life, countered U.S. interests across the globe (other than during WWII), and credibly threatened the U.S. and our allies with annihilation for decades. Yet, the U.S. maintained diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R from 1934 to the end of the Cold War.

The impact of the Vietnam War on American history far surpasses the Iran hostage crisis. During the Vietnam War, 58,000 Americans were killed, 150,000 were wounded, and

1,500 were missing in action. Yet, the U.S. resumed relations with Vietnam only two decades after this highly traumatic war ended. Finally, communist China fought on behalf of communist North Korean and communist North Vietnamese forces against America in two wars, and between 1949 and 1972 represented, with the Soviet Union, the vanguard of anti-American international communism. America, though, chose to begin the process of resuming relations with communist China during the Vietnam War. All these momentous decisions were based upon the same primary assessment - **that a change in diplomatic relations was in the long-term national security interest of the United States.**

Thus, the appropriate question is whether establishing a limited, reversible resumed official American presence in Iran at this point is in the national security interest of the United States. Taking all the factors outlined above, and recent American diplomatic history into consideration, the answer is yes. As history shows, this does not mean immediately restoring full diplomatic relations, nor does it entail a blanket endorsement of Iran's doctrines or policies, nor is such a resumption of ties irreversible.

However, before any initial steps, both countries must first conclusively address the legacy of November 4, 1979.

The Legacy of the Hostage Crisis

The Islamic Republic still commemorates the Embassy seizure every November 4th, and the U.S. Embassy takeover is still considered by many one of the foundational events of the Islamic Revolution. Moving beyond U.S.-Iranian enmity to establish even a limited diplomatic presence will require a different narrative and a different reality on the ground in Iran.

A first step to advancing this goal will be to end the Iranian government's annual November 4th commemoration of the U.S. Embassy seizure. In addition, the Iranian government can quietly offer some form of compensation to the individual hostages and their families. Finally, as noted previously, Iran must explicitly reaffirm its adherence to all provisions of the Geneva Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Affairs. In response, the U.S. must provide reciprocal guarantees to Iran for its diplomatic operations in the United States.

These steps would not mean that Iran is rejecting its revolution, nor would it entail a blanket U.S. endorsement of Iranian government doctrines or policies, nor would it mean ignoring the real historic grievances between the U.S. and Iran. Rather, these actions would demonstrate Iran's willingness to accept responsibility for its violations of international law during the hostage crisis and acknowledge the very real pain these events caused the hostages, their families, and the American people. In addition, these steps would demonstrate a mutual commitment to finally move beyond this traumatic chapter in U.S.-Iran relations, and potentially take a small step forward towards a different relationship.



Moving beyond the past and re-establishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran - at first limited, incremental, and reversible - is in the national security interest of the United States, and enjoys strong support by those most acutely impacted by the lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence - the Iranian American community. Many of the Americans most directly harmed by the events of November 4, 1979 - the American hostages - will also support this measure, should Iran provide suitable closure to this episode through its words and conduct.

Those opposing this measure should, therefore, consider whether, based on all the points outlined above, this step would help achieve key U.S. national security goals more effectively than past approaches. Questions of timing, procedures, and conditions are, of course, subject to further discussion. But any realistic analysis of the fundamental proposition - that a re-established U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran would advance U.S. national security - leads to the conclusion that it would.

NOTES

ⁱ The student groups participating in the embassy takeover purportedly held the hostages in ransom to force the U.S. to return the Shah to Iran for trial. Meanwhile, the most common reasons cited for Khomeini's eventually endorsing the hostage seizure were: 1) to quell a potential pro-Shah counter-coup, 2) to weaken and displace pro-Western moderates and secular nationalists among the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) early leadership, and 3) to pre-empt anti-American rhetoric among leftist groups. Ultimately, the Embassy seizure achieved these goals for Khomeini, and along with the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, helped him consolidate control of Iranian institutions and policy.

ⁱⁱ As outlined in Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) works *Leviathan* (1651) and *De Cive*, (1642) the "state of nature" is the primeval state of man before state order and the rule of law was established. It is marked by a state of "war of all against all" caused by a lack of "a common power to keep them in awe". Under these conditions, there is scant order and most productive activity is either too risky or its rewards too uncertain to allow progress. In the case of U.S.-Iran relations, the lack of diplomatic engagement, and the "locus of policy discipline" (metaphorically comparable to Hobbes' *Leviathan*) exercised through diplomatic representatives and protocols, creates a chaotic, dangerous, and brutal environment (the state of nature) – both in practice and in rhetoric – that has marked U.S.-Iran relations for the past three decades.

ⁱⁱⁱ A U.S. Embassy country team, led by the U.S. Ambassador or principal officer at an overseas post, includes representatives of all agencies and offices at the post to plan, confer, and implement concrete U.S. foreign policy goals in the host country.

^{iv} Strict U.S. limitations on Iranian nonimmigrant visa parameters have been in place, however, long before 9/11, with virtually all nonimmigrant visas for Iranians limited to one-entry/three months duration since the mid-1990s. (In 2011, the Department of State extended Iranian student visas to multiple entry/one year validity and duration for qualified students in most areas of study.)

^v The Department of State issues periodic consular travel warnings for Iran noting these limitations. The most recent version here:
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/iran-travel-warning.html>

^{vi} It is worth noting that this strong support among the Iranian American community for the establishment of a U.S. Interests Section in Tehran that could provide consular services long predates the recent overtures between the U.S. and Iran, and the P5+1/Iran interim nuclear agreement (see survey discussion).

^{vii}
<http://www.paaia.org/CMS/Data/Sites/1/PDFs/2011surveyofiranianamericans.pdf>

^{viii} The consular section in particular would need to ramp up quite gradually, and only if bilateral conditions permit, before

its activities could even begin replace the multiple U.S. third-country posts Iranians now use in high volumes for their visa processing. At the outset, the consular section would likely only handle a small number of visas. It is important, therefore, that all parties manage expectations carefully on this issue.

^{ix} (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961)
http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf

(Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963)
http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_2_1963.p

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