

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

U.S. Policy on Iran and the Middle East: Where Do We Go From Here?

U.S. Global Engagement, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

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Transcript

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This event took place immediately after President Rouhani's speech at the UN.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Welcome to the Carnegie Council and a very special occasion. I'm delighted to welcome back an old friend, Gary Sick.

Introduction

Dr. Sick served on the National Security Council under three presidents—[Ford](#), [Carter](#), and [Reagan](#). He was the principal White House advisor for Persian Gulf affairs from 1976 to 1981—so, by definition, that of course was a period that saw the [Iranian Revolution](#) and [hostage crisis](#). He is now adjunct professor of international affairs and senior research scholar at the School of International and Political Affairs at Columbia University. He also directs the [Gulf/2000 Project](#), which I'm sure many of us know in this room is perhaps *the* single most valuable resource in Gulf affairs anywhere in the globe.

Gary, welcome back to the Carnegie Council.

GARY SICK: This is a real pleasure. Thank you very much, David.

Remarks

DAVID SPEEDIE: I should say that, literally, before we came down, Gary and I watched the streaming of President [Rouhani's speech](#) at the United Nations. The good news is we heard President Rouhani's speech. The bad news is we've torn up the script and rewrote it, just for your benefit. [Laughter]

Gary, obviously, as this day dawned, we thought we might be on the cusp of something, a defining—or redefining—moment in U.S.-Western-Iranian relations. We have a new Iranian president here in town at the General Assembly. There has been an exchange of letters between the two presidents—that, of course, has happened before, but not always with great result. There has been the [release](#) of at least a handful of political prisoners in Iran, the appointment of a Western-educated [foreign minister](#). So a lot was going on.

And now, of course, we've heard presidents [Obama](#) and Rouhani [speak](#). What's your immediate reaction?

GARY SICK: You have to start from the point that so far it's just talk. We really have not seen anything happen yet. I've been living with this whole business of U.S.–Iran relations ever since 1977 actually, which is a long time, and I've been doing it pretty much full-time. The outfit that I run, Gulf /2000—which, you can't join unless you are a Middle East specialist or a Persian Gulf specialist—is just right now awash in stuff going on. But I have never in that long period of time seen a positive action, a set of positive rhetorics from both sides. Basically, what usually happens is that one side or the other feels that it can make an offer, it can say something important, it can suggest something; or it can say "I'm ready," and, typically, the other side isn't.

A few years ago, President [Khatami](#), when he was elected president, was also sending some very, very strong signals to the United States. In January of 1998 he made an [address](#) to the American people. He, in effect, apologized for the hostage crisis. He made a number of very conciliatory statements—said they were against terrorism, they were not looking for a nuclear weapon, et cetera. In response, the [Clinton administration](#), which was by that time committed to the idea of dual containment, said, "Is this for real?" and it took them two full years to decide that "yes, maybe it is." By the time they responded to the overtures, Khatami was permanently wounded, he was surrounded by hard-liners on his side, he had lost the momentum that he had coming in, and we all lost the opportunity.

There have been a lot of other missed opportunities. So for me to see Rouhani [elected](#) in a surprise election that was really the Iranian people voting against the system, given all the choices—they didn't have much choice. The distance between the hard-liners and Rouhani on one side or the other was not that great, and they made sure that it wasn't. But they voted against the guy who was most likely to be opposed to what they had been through with [Ahmadinejad](#) for the last eight years.

When they voted for him, he was making it very clear he intended to take a very different view. So he has done that. Within a month now, we have President Obama standing up before the world and laying out the outlines of a possible settlement between the two sides.

As I say, nothing has happened yet. But I must say this is probably the most positive moment I have seen in that whole period of time since the Iranian Revolution.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Obviously, various things have been said about Rouhani, even before he landed on these shores—that he was out to build trust, serious and substantial talks were likely to happen. On the other hand, he has been described as the consummate regime insider, and the phrase most often used was "charm offensive," which is just a wee bit derogatory.

But the most amusing [thing](#) I read was that he promises "to eradicate the memory of Iran's provocateur-in-chief's uncanny strut on the world stage." Now, there's a [Shakespearean](#) thought if ever there was one.

Just give us a couple of takeaways from what he said this afternoon.

GARY SICK: Well, his speech this afternoon in one respect was sort of typical Iranian. He covered all the waterfront; he hit all the bases. He didn't mention the word "Israel," which actually is really very clear. [Netanyahu](#) was not mentioned, Israel was not mentioned, and I'm sure that his predecessor was easier to deal with for Israel than this guy is.

I was in a meeting with an American Jewish group about a year ago or two ago and I was giving a talk about what Iran's relations with the West are and so forth. A guy stood up there, who was a Jewish leader in some part of the United States, and he said, "Before I ask my question, I do have to make a comment. I sometimes think that Ahmadinejad is a [Mossad](#) agent, that he was actually working for Israel, because never in our entire history have we had anybody who has increased our fund-raising." [Laughter] He said, "We just mention his name and people open up their checkbooks." [Laughter]

That's not a joke. It actually works that way. We have seen people, starting with the prime minister of Israel, who have started talking about the fact that we've got to get tough on this. Actually, [Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#), who's the firebrand, ultra-rightist hawk in the Congress from Florida, [said](#) outright the other day, "I miss Ahmadinejad." [Laughter] I think that says something.

So something has happened here. But at this point, again, I don't want to go too far.

To look at what Rouhani said, first of all, he wants to identify himself as a sort of anti-Ahmadinejad. He is the guy who represents the polar opposite. He wants people to think of Iran as a cultured, sensible state, a nation that can actually participate actively and constructively in international affairs. That was not Ahmadinejad's approach. So he wants to portray Iran that way, which is the way, in fact, a lot of Iranians see their country. To that end, what he did was hit on all of the key points that Iran usually hits on.

But his theme was violence. He said that what the world should do, what the UN should do, is to focus on violence in the Middle East. He then identified a number of examples of what violence looks like.

Not to anybody's surprise, he thought that the use of [sanctions](#), which affect ordinary people far beyond the leadership, is a form of violence, and that the threat of the use of military force is violence.

The [treatment](#) of the Palestinians, from his point of view, was violence, the way they are dealt with and so forth. He didn't mention the words "Israel" or "Netanyahu," but his message was very clear where he was coming out on that thing.

He actually proposed at the end of his speech—he said, "Instead of creating coalitions for war in the Middle East, we ought to create coalitions in favor of nonviolence." Whether this will take off or anything will come of it I don't know, but it gave a structure to his remarks, and I think that is what he wanted to do.

He also then hit some very specific points about what they are prepared to do. In the clearest, most unequivocal possible way, he said, "We have no interest in building [nuclear weapons](#). We never will under any circumstances. Anybody who is using that as a means of blowing up the Iranian threat is in fact just wanting to attack us. There is no justification for that."

I must say in passing that Iran took a decision in the mid-1980s that they were going to build a nuclear program. The [Shah](#) had done some time earlier. They had renounced it and then came back to it.

Most countries that build a nuclear weapon—Israel, South Africa, India, Pakistan—those countries, typically, from the time they take a decision until they have a device in hand, even a country as poor as Pakistan, takes about 10 years at the maximum. It can be shorter than that.

Iran took its decision to build a nuclear program in 1985. According to our best intelligence, they have not taken a decision to build a nuclear weapon yet. And still we are treating them as if they are an imminent threat to us. This is basically what he was focusing on, is that there was a disconnect here between what they are doing actually and what they want. And it's clear that he has some things in mind.

The newest thing that happened, quite beyond Rouhani's speech—and I think Obama's speech is very important also—is that on Thursday the P5+1, the permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany, were going to sit down and have a strategy session about Iran: "What do we say to Iran when we get together in our next meeting?"

And, wonder of wonders, yesterday [Zarif](#), the new foreign minister who is a friend of many people in New York and Washington, [met with Cathy Ashton](#), who is the EU representative to the talks. At the end of the meeting, she announced that Iran was joining the [meeting](#). It will be the very first time that the foreign minister of Iran has sat down with the foreign ministers of all of those states, and certainly the first time that any Iranian foreign minister has sat down with the [secretary of state](#) of the United States, who will be at the table. We are talking about seven people sitting around a table, and one of those will be Zarif, one of them will be Kerry, and then the foreign ministers of all the other countries involved, including Lady Ashton will chair the meeting. That's something new.

My guess is that, although Rouhani today was not explicit about exactly what they were proposing, the basic outlines of what I think Iran is willing to accept are pretty well established. I think that will come out.

I am going to be curious to see what happens in that meeting. But I suspect that Iran will show up for that meeting with a proposal in hand. That proposal, I think, is one that—one of my friends said the other day that the actual outlines of an agreement with Iran on the nuclear thing could be defined by any second-year international relations student, that it's not that hard. The question is: Do you have the political will to do it?

In this case, this morning we had Obama basically putting Kerry in charge of negotiations with Iran, which suggest some political will on our side; and Rouhani clearly has the backing of the [Supreme Leader](#). Both of those, I think, are good for the moment.

But they may not last very long. Both parties have really serious domestic problems. Obama is going to get beaten up on the fact that if he's going to be soft on Iran, all this kind of thing—this is predictable. And if you look at Netanyahu's talking points, which have been published so it's not a big secret, they are basically the antithesis of what Obama said today in this speech. So that is going to create problems for the president here. For Rouhani, a lot of what he said today—going through the litany of problems and violence and so forth—was clearly intended for his audience back home. It was to satisfy them that he's not soft on America.

But when you've got two domestic situations that are that sensitive to each other, then finding a way to bring them together is a real trick. I think that's where we are right now. So what happens from here is really far more important than what has happened up to this point.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You mentioned President Obama handing over the negotiations to Kerry. I believe I read also that Rouhani has also transferred authority for negotiations on the nuclear question to his foreign minister.

GARY SICK: Yes. Actually, Rouhani himself was the negotiator for Iran on the nuclear issue in the

past. Nobody in Iran knows the nuclear file better than he does.

He was the personal representative of the Supreme Leader on the National Security Council staff for 25 years, and he was the personal representative who negotiated with the Europeans back in 2003 to 2005, when they were on the cusp of a deal, and the United States government stepped in and said "No way, we're having nothing to do with any kind of a deal." It fell through, which then got Rouhani tagged basically as an appeaser, basically a guy who was ready to give away the store and the other side kicked him out. They said, "You can't trust these Americans. Look what they did to us, and you were naïve to believe that you would in fact get them to go along with you." That's where he's coming from.

So this guy's going to be wary, he's going to watch out, because he does believe in his heart of hearts that the Americans are not to be trusted. And we believe the same thing with regard to him. So that makes for an interesting combination.

But Zarif was the UN ambassador here in New York for five years. In the course of that time, all of us who work on Iran—and I say literally all of us, basically the think tank people, the people in Washington, the people here who specialize in Iran work—have met him, have had dinner with him, we've been on panels with him, we've talked to him privately. We all know him very well. And that includes people like [Joe Biden](#), who met him. A number of key people in the Congress have sat down at his dinner table as well.

He knows American politics very well. His English is flawless, absolutely impeccable. He's the guy now in charge of the game. So that's where we're beginning from. That is hopeful. We have not had anybody like that in charge.

Compared to [Jalili](#), his predecessor, this guy is just in another world completely. Jalili was a hard-line guy, not very smart, and who was given to just preaching endlessly. At the first meetings they had, he was telling people about his dissertation. When he was at the table, he preached about his dissertation, which was on some theological issue.

We're not going to do that now. So I expect Zarif to show up at the next meeting—not to give away the store, but to say, "Okay, forget about the last eight years. Let's think about what we can do from here and come up"—my guess would be he will define what diplomats would call a "heads of agreement;" that is: "Here are the things that we're aiming at. These are our overall objectives. This is the game plan. Now let's talk about how we get from here to there." That's what I would rather expect him to do.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You referred before to the preferred candidates of the Supreme Leader. Jalili was the most extreme.

GARY SICK: Jalili was the hard-line candidate in the last election. Everybody, all of the American pundits, said "without question Jalili will win" because he was the favorite of the Supreme Leader, he was the hard-liner in the bunch, and it was sure that he would win. He got 16 percent of the vote.

DAVID SPEEDIE: One last question before we go to the audience, Gary, which builds on what you just said about [Khamenei](#). In the most recent *Foreign Affairs*, there is an [article](#) that I'm sure you've read, by [Akbar Ganji](#), the Iranian journalist and dissident. It's called "Who is Ali Khamenei? The Worldview of Iran's Supreme Leader"—a pretty daunting topic I'd have thought. Given the writer's background, it's a pretty balanced piece, it seems to me.

But he reminds us of two things that seem to be self-evident but also important. One is Khamenei is Iran's head of state, commander-in-chief, and top ideologue, whose views are what will ultimately shape Iranian policy.

Second, while a cultured individual who seems to relish contact with Western scholars, his views have hardened with the growing conviction that what the United States and the West seek is regime change in Iran. And yet, Khamenei [came](#) a few days ago with this intriguing phrase, "heroic flexibility." What is heroic flexibility and who is Khamenei? You've got three minutes.

GARY SICK: The Iranians are very good at phrases like this. In the days of [Mosaddeq](#), they used the idea of "negative equilibrium." In this case, it's actually a wrestling term. The Iranians love wrestling.

DAVID SPEEDIE: And they've just [won](#) the world championship.

GARY SICK: This is their national sport. They actually have put out a documentary showing what he means by "heroic." I haven't actually watched it yet, but I've got it on my system. Too many things going on. There's just not enough time to look at everything.

But it basically is a way of dealing with your opponent so that you give a little bit in order to get a little bit, and to overcome your opponent. So the concept is "heroic" in the sense that you win in the end, but the "flexibility" is that you know when to back off, when to change, when to shift your ground, and so forth, and that you are flexible in your ability to deal with reality. So it's not a bad thing.

I'd just add one small word here. There has been a lot written about Khamenei. I'm in a minority, but I am one of those who believes that he is not as supreme as he's made out to be. This whole business about the Supreme Leader—he wants everybody to believe that.

In some respects, the best way to put it, I think, is that Khamenei has a veto, that if basically he wants to stop something that is coming along, he does have the power to step in and do that. He doesn't do it very often. The other thing that happens, he is a coalition builder. He actually is quite insecure in his position. He got that job almost by default. For instance, it was originally designed for [Khomeini](#), his predecessor, the founder of the Revolution, who was a grand scholar, a truly grand ayatollah, whose qualifications on religious thought were doubted by nobody.

Actually, when Khamenei took the job he had not even done what you would call his thesis for becoming an ayatollah. He was not an ayatollah. They just promoted him overnight. So the word "ayatollah" attached to him is a construct, it has been invented.

So he has never had the full support of the clergy in Iran, certainly not the clergy in the Shia center in Najaf in Iraq—they deny the whole concept of religious governance.

And he is constantly trying to balance people out. In the last few years, he has become very dependent on the [Revolutionary Guard](#); that is, he needed them to support him. In that sense, I have felt he was actually less supreme, if you like, than the Revolutionary Guard. When push came to shove and who was really responsible here, he needed the Revolutionary Guard worse than they needed him.

Now, that changes as time goes on. But my point is not that he is powerless or that he isn't influential, just that his power is not the kind of thing that you think of of a [Stalin](#) or a [Saddam Hussein](#). It's a very different kind of power. It's the power to build coalitions, not to come in and say to

everybody "this is the way it's going to be" and everybody jumps. It doesn't work that way in Iran.

QUESTION: Peter Weinstein.

I'm baffled by what's happening now with the Iranians. Ever since the overthrow of the Shah, Iran's foreign policy can be summarized, in part, as "death to America."

The Persian civilization is very old and very sophisticated, a great civilization. The educated people there are more sophisticated than Americans.

It seems to me that Obama has added to his numerous foreign policy errors by saying, "Sure I'll speak to you." Who is "to you"? First of all, Rouhani is one of the—if you will allow me to say it—puppets of Khamenei. He's not going to make the decisions. And I quite agree with you, Khamenei can veto everything he does, and therefore that's the guy you have to watch.

Accordingly, it seems to me—and I'd like your reaction to it, because it's the opposite of what Obama is doing, and it seems to me our policy is so naïve—that we should say, "No, we're not going to speak to you. We've been speaking to you. We have numerous resolutions put out by the UN, so, therefore, you do something first, then we'll speak to you. Act out what we've asked for already."

GARY SICK: This is an extremely common position, and in the media it's probably the majority position. There's a great deal of support for that. I think that it's wrong in almost every aspect in terms of where we are in terms of reality.

As I said in the first place, Iran has been saying for years that it wasn't building a nuclear weapon, and we said, "We don't believe you. We absolutely assume that you really are." And yet, they have been 25 years or more in this process and they still don't have a nuclear weapon. Either they're really stupid, or maybe they actually meant what they said.

We have refused to even consider that possibility, because all of our actions have been built in the idea that Iran was lying to us at every stage and that they are getting closer and closer and that there's some horrible thing that's going to happen here. The reality just doesn't bear that out.

We had a case where, right after 9/11, the United States [went into](#) Afghanistan to get rid of the [Taliban](#). Iran was happy to get rid of the Taliban. It was their worst enemy to the east.

Iran, unlike us, had actually been cultivating the opposition in Afghanistan for a long time. So they came to us and offered their assistance and said, "Okay, we'll help you in your takeover of Afghanistan"—and they did. They brought the [Northern Alliance](#) into the operation, which was critical in making it happen.

Then they went to [Bonn](#), and it was actually Mr. Zarif, the present foreign minister, who was their representative dealing with [Zalmay Khalilzad](#) and his friends in the operation in Afghanistan. They succeeded. The Bonn Conference succeeded. The Americans who were there give credit to Iran for doing that.

Then, a month later, after that was over, [George Bush](#) went on public television with his [State of the Union Address](#) and described Iran as a member of the "axis of evil." To say that the Iranians were stunned by this is really an understatement.

They have never really recovered from that, in terms of: "What do you expect us to do? Are we supposed to just completely surrender, lie down, and do anything you tell us to do, and then maybe

you will take us seriously?"

That aspect of it, it seems to me, never makes it into the American media. We never hear that side of what's going on.

Actually, in 2003, Mr. Zarif again was the one who penned a document, sent it to Washington through the Swiss, which outlined an agreement between the United States and Iran. This was just about the time of the U.S. [invasion](#) of Iraq. He outlined what it was. That is available on the Internet. Read it.

Today we would regard that as a really terrific agreement. It identified all of the things that we wanted to deal with. It provided the opportunity for a real opening of all kinds.

And we [never answered](#) the mail. The Iranians pay attention to that. This is not something that they say, "Oh well, we wouldn't really expect the Americans to respond."

I would hope that when Zarif sits down with the foreign ministers on Thursday that he would pull out a version of that same offer that in 2003 we rejected and put it on the table, because it would look really good today. So it's not so simple.

The reality is—and I insist on this—that Khamenei is a super-pragmatist. He knows, for instance, if there is momentum going for some kind of a settlement between the United States and Iran, that's going to be very popular in Iran and be very popular with the very constituencies that he relies on. I'll bet you that he will not stand up and oppose it on theological grounds or something of the sort. Instead, I think he'll take it very seriously. I think it's a mistake for us to assume that he won't.

So there is a different way of looking at the same set of facts. I understand where you're coming from and I recognize it very well.

QUESTION: Tyler Beebe.

Would this new moderation in tone be happening at all if economic sanctions were not as effective as they apparently have been, to everyone's surprise?

GARY SICK: Actually, the sanctions are America's new weapon of mass destruction. That's not an exaggeration. We have now mastered the manipulation of the economic system to the point where, even if Iran sells its oil, it can't get paid for it. It won't clear through international banks.

But at the same time as we are affecting their oil, we're also affecting the small businessman in Tehran and the people.

Medicines are completely exempted from the sanctions. And yet, they have to be paid for through the banks, and the banks refuse to do it, simply on the grounds that they might make a mistake and we would put sanctions on them. They can't afford to take a chance. So basically the access to medicines is cut off, access to international markets is cut off, and this affects everybody.

Iran is one of the biggest importers of grain, and in the past, ours—wheat, rice, and the like. It's very hard for them to buy that these days because there's no way to clear the check. So that is having an effect on them.

But I'd remind you that in 2003 Iran offered an agreement with us that was really quite good. For two years they quit all of their enrichment and said, "We're ready to do a deal with you guys," and they were prepared. It was Rouhani who who negotiated that. That was before sanctions.

So yes, sanctions offer an incentive. Right now there is no question about it. Rouhani this afternoon in his speech specifically identified sanctions as a form of violence, which I can see from his perspective would be justified. So it is a factor.

But I think the point is that it goes beyond just sanctions. It isn't just sanctions. So the people who say, "Gee, sanctions did all of this so let's put on more sanctions and obviously that will take care of it"—beware of what you're hearing, because in reality the people who argue that all we need is more pressure, more sanctions, more threats of military action and so forth, are really people who don't want a negotiated settlement with Iran.

What they really want—they don't say so publicly—is regime change. They want to overthrow the regime in Iran and replace it with another one. I would like that. I have no problem with the idea of regime change. But, in the meantime, I would rather have a workable, verifiable, transparent agreement with Iran about its nuclear activities than an attempt, which I think is ill-founded, to think that we can overthrow their regime by putting sanctions on and threatening them with military force, and [assassinating scientists](#) and doing the various other things that go on.

So yes and no.

QUESTION: Sondra Stein.

Hopefully, if there is an agreement on enrichment and the discussion is on expanding some type of relations and sanctions, do you see in the cards that Iran would give up support for [Hezbollah](#) and might change that dynamic with Israel?

GARY SICK: Unfortunately, no. Hezbollah is a Shia organization. I have a pretty long memory of some of these things that have been going on.

The Shah had forces in southern Lebanon supporting the Shia of southern Lebanon in his day also. Iran is the largest, most populous, and best-known Shia nation, and they feel they have a certain responsibility.

Now, what I think could happen is that Iran would continue its support for Hezbollah, but if there were movement toward a real settlement, which went beyond just a sort of temporary thing, but really looked as if it were taking off, then Iran I think would support Hezbollah as a legitimate political player in Lebanese politics and not as a threat to Israel.

I think that is doable. I think getting Hezbollah to focus inward on Lebanese politics, which—they want to be a big player in Lebanese politics, and in some ways that's what they're really doing right now—I think persuading them to go that way, rather than spending all of their effort focused on the south and getting ready to fire missiles, is something that could actually be negotiated.

But you're not to get Iran to back away from Hezbollah, simply because of the relationship. It is too old, it is too well-established, and Iran would regard it as a total betrayal.

QUESTION: James Starkman.

How would you outline the mistakes in policy that the United States and the West have made, going back even to the [Mossadeq](#) era, up through the present time, and how might that instruct us in terms of policy going forward?

Also, I was just a little surprised to hear that you would have no problem with regime change, since

there seems to be an opening here with this regime. You might comment on that, too.

GARY SICK: With regard to that, I have no truck for religious rule. I mean I do not think that this is the best way to run a government. I think that they have screwed up Iran's economic and foreign policy terribly, that their real weakness is not so much their belligerence abroad, it's their dealing with their own people, the lack of freedom, the artificial rules that are placed on people, which the Iranians didn't really think that they were fighting for in the Iranian Revolution.

But there is an opening, and Rouhani and Zarif are people that you can really deal with, and that are open to that. They are not going to sell Iran down the river, but they are prepared to do a deal, which I think will answer most, if not all, of our requirements.

So in that sense I'm quite prepared—I've never been bothered by the fact of negotiating with an enemy. That's who you negotiate with. Iran has been an enemy. They still are an enemy. If somebody is prepared on the other side, however, to talk sensibly and listen to you as well as you listen to them, I'm in favor of that. I don't care who they are.

But, on the other hand, it doesn't mean that I love this regime or that I'm willing to defend them in any way. I don't like this regime, and I have actually made a point of saying that publicly many, many times.

What was the question?

QUESTIONER: The mistakes that have been made . . .

GARY SICK: We don't have time. I could give a little history lesson here, I think, in terms of all the things that have gone wrong.

Some friends of mine have actually collected all of the examples. The history of U.S.–Iran relations is simply littered with the corpses of missed opportunities. It is on all sides. We have made horrible mistakes. They have made horrible mistakes.

It has always been—I like to compare it to a teeter-totter: when one side is up, the other side is down. So the side that's up says, "I don't need to negotiate," and the other side says, "I don't dare negotiate." And then—boom!—it switches the other way, and the same thing happens, only the positions are reversed.

Getting to a point of equilibrium is really hard. On the very few times that it has ever come to that point, one side or the other missed the boat. We are at a point like that right now.

So what are the things to avoid? My goodness, they are so numerous.

But Iran, for instance, in the early 1980s really was engaged in an attempt to wipe out their enemies. The same way that Mossad went after the Palestinians in Europe, who they went after for revenge, Iran did the same thing after the Revolution, and it went after the people who were involved in that. So they assassinated people in Europe. Very bad idea. It was a horrible period in Iran's history.

But at the same time that was going on, we were supporting Saddam Hussein, who was using chemical weapons at an incredible rate.

One of the things that was interesting about Obama's speech today, talking about history, is he mentioned specifically the [1953 coup](#) and implied that the United States had been involved in that

and that that is a grievance that the Iranians have against us.

He also mentioned chemical weapons, and he mentioned examples. For instance, he mentioned the [Holocaust](#), but then in the same breath mentioned the use of chemical weapons against Iran in the [Iran–Iraq War](#). Now, that was a telling point, because Iran lost about 20,000 dead immediately on the battlefield and maybe 100,000 casualties, and those people are still in hospitals in Iran, and they're still dying, and they can't breathe, and it's really, really bad.

Iran knows more about chemical weapons than any other country in the world. Their hospitals are full of people. So anybody who wants to study the effects of chemical weapons, Iran is where they go, because that's where the casualties exist.

I thought the president in talking about those two issues made it very clear that we understand that the past has not been a pretty event.

I would say that President Khatami, when he was the president of Iran, went through the same kind of litany about the hostage crisis and other things. Let's face it, the hostage crisis was the first fully televised foreign policy crisis in history. Many of you here can remember it. My students are getting to the point where they can't remember it anymore. [Laughter]

This was a crisis that was piped into people's living rooms night after night after night for 444 days. The image was bearded, fanatic Iranians waving their fists and shouting, "Death to America!" That has an effect. That brand, that image that was created by Iran in that period, has persisted to this day and has a tremendous amount to do with our own domestic politics. Nobody likes Iranians. They all fear and hate Iranians, just because of the image that has been created.

It's difficult, because not only does Rouhani have to fight the eight years of catastrophe that were his predecessor's existence—I mean Ahmadinejad was a disaster for everybody, except for the real hard-liners on both sides; they loved him. But other than that he was a disaster. He was a disaster for Iran, he was a disaster for international politics, he was a disaster for the Middle East as a whole. Rouhani was left with that hole that Ahmadinejad had dug, and he's got to work his way out of it.

He is also left with the legacy of things like the hostage crisis and other events, which are not forgotten. They live on even in our genes. They're there. They are part of our body politic. Getting out of that is a tough row to hoe.

So people are right to say, "Okay, show me the beef. You're talking a nice talk. Show me what you really want to do." We aren't at that point yet. We're getting close.

DAVID SPEEDIE: The ironic corollary, of course, is that it has been documented that among all the countries of the region, the view of America is much warmer in Iran than certainly any other country there. One commentator actually said "including Israel." Now, whether that's true I'm not quite sure. It's probably true.

GARY SICK: Actually, according to the polls, that's really true.

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

Supposedly, if we are fortunate enough to see some good diplomatic development, a rapprochement between the United States and Iran would take some time. What would be the effect on that happy progress of (a) [punitive bombing](#) by us in [Syria](#) or (b) a military defeat, or impending defeat, of [Assad](#)

by the various rebels?

GARY SICK: That's a very good question. If I may paraphrase your question, what does Syria have to do with all of this? Since we don't have a long time here, let me take the liberty to change your question a little bit, or at least change my answer to your question a little bit.

I see Syria as a potential opportunity for the [Obama administration](#) with regard to Iran in this set of circumstances that we now have.

On the Iranian thing, the one thing that Rouhani spoke with passion about in his speech was their hatred for chemical weapons. He was equivocal about the [use](#) of chemical weapons by Assad. This is a sort of diplomatic fiction that Iran and the Russians have maintained, and it lets them deal with Assad in a special way. So if they're going to be effective with him, they can't come in and say, "You used chemical weapons." So they pretend that it was the opposition. Everybody knows better. But that's a diplomatic fiction, and it can be useful.

But he said clearly he fully supports Assad's willingness to [do away](#) with his chemical weapons. So Iran is on our side with regard to the chemical weapons and getting rid of them, and will in fact cooperate with us to see that that happens. Iran feels about chemical weapons the same way that the Japanese feel about nuclear weapons: They are completely neurotic to the idea, they hate them, and they want to see them go. Regardless of how you get there, they want to see those identified and destroyed, and they will support us on that.

The second thing is that Iran has, for actually a couple of years, been promoting the idea that what we could have instead of a civil war, a collapse of Assad and the replacement by wild-eyed Sunni rebels who might actually end up being worse than Assad, and very likely would be worse than Assad. They're saying that's not a good answer to the question. They have made it very clear that they will support a negotiated settlement that protects everybody involved and doesn't turn the system over to a bunch of real crazies. That's our position too.

In that sense, if we are smart enough and adept enough, we have the makings here of actually using that to help split them away from Assad. They have said that they are not committed to Assad personally. They want to see a change, but they want to see it in a smoother, peaceful way rather than a collapse.

So there's something to work with. And Obama in his speech actually recognized that fact when he said, "All states should be invited to participate in the [Geneva II](#) operation to find a political solution." "All states" includes Iran. That is the first time ever that the United States has suggested that we might in fact permit Iran to sit down at an international conference. That's something that the Iranians will like.

I think it also is useful because it puts them on their good behavior. So they say, "Okay, you're going to be allowed to come in and sit at the table and participate along with everybody else on this diplomatic initiative. If you screw things up, if you come in and you're a bomb thrower, clearly you're never going to do this again."

So, in effect, Rouhani is sort of on record as wanting Iran to behave well with regard to both the chemical weapons side and on the political discussion. To me it's a kind of political jujitsu, that you take advantage of their own interests and weak points to pressure them or lever them to do what we want them to do. I think we've got a real possibility here. And, from what I heard Obama say, they understand that.

QUESTION: Catherine Dumait-Harper.

I was very happy also that you highlighted the role of our media, because I think there is a lot of ignorance. And I was surprised about your point about regime change, when you see what is going on in [Iraq](#), [Libya](#), and [Egypt](#), as well. I would probably argue with the gentleman about countries that don't respect resolutions when we know that some of our friends certainly don't implement or respect UN Security Council resolutions.

But my question has more to do with Saudi Arabia. We know the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. When you mentioned Afghanistan, that was certainly the case. So I would like to know what is your view on what is going to happen now, hopefully, with the talks with Rouhani about the role of Saudi Arabia.

GARY SICK: Iran has said quite explicitly that it intends to maintain a policy of positive relations with its neighbors in the region. For the most part, that has been their policy.

For instance, Saudi Arabia is the home of the Hajj. That's where everybody goes on pilgrimage. On one of the pilgrimages back in 1987, the Iranians, who were very political at that point, were standing up and shouting and holding demonstrations of their own, within their own encampment. Pilgrims are not supposed to be political. The Saudis came in to break these up. A [riot](#) ensued, and something like 400 Iranians were killed by the Saudis. That led to a break in relations. It led to some very, very bad feelings.

Then it was repaired. The Saudis, in fact, have invested in Iranian infrastructure and the like.

But apart from that, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has always been tense, and it is going to stay that way. They don't like each other. They really don't. But they live with each other and for the most part have managed to do that, though it has its ups and downs.

What has happened recently is that you'll recall that we [went into Iraq](#) and we eliminated what the Saudis saw as a Sunni leadership, and we replaced it, for the first time in basically memory, the first time almost ever—you have to go back to Ottoman days to find a case of Shia ruling in Iraq. From the Saudi point of view, we installed that regime. The Saudis saw this as part of a sort of grand scheme in which the Shia were going to come in and take over the Middle East, and there are all kinds of scare theories and various other things.

From their perspective now, they see the Middle East as "us and them," and us is Sunni and them is Shia. So anyplace where the Shia rise up or raise their head is an attack on the Saudi national interests.

They have never recognized Iraq. They don't have an embassy in Baghdad. They don't have an ambassador in Baghdad. They refuse to recognize this regime because it's Shia.

When you look at what happened in Syria, you had peaceful demonstrations, but most of them were Sunnis against the Alawites, who are sort of crypto-Shia, they're half Shia. The Saudis came in and began arming them with vast amounts of money and so forth.

It wasn't all their fault, but the Saudis came in and said, "This is a sectarian battle. It's a battle between good and evil. It's a battle between Sunni and Shia. That's what we have to fight against." And it is now, for sure.

When we did that in Iraq, I remember talking to a very senior official in the U.S. government who was talking about the horrible things that Iran was doing in Iraq and various other places and the whole Shia business.

I said, "Mr. Ambassador, don't you think we had something to do with that because of our actions in Iraq?"

He stopped for a second. Then he said, "Well, we didn't mean to." [Laughter]

I think that's true. I don't think we knew what we were doing. In the process, we left a lot of wreckage behind us that everybody is now trying to dig out of.

The sectarian breakdown in the Middle East is very much being funded and supported by Saudi Arabia, and they are doing it as a sort of proxy war against the Iranians.

Even the Egyptians now are talking about this. Egypt doesn't have any Shia. They don't even exist in Egypt. There are a few people scattered around here and there, but most Egyptians have never met a Shia in their life. But they are still talking about the Shia threat to the Middle East.

So the Saudis have done their work very well, and we helped them along the way, without realizing what we were doing. I'm afraid that it's going to get worse before it gets better.

DAVID SPEEDIE: On that upbeat note, Gary, what you have given us today has been as rich as it has been timely. It was also very kind of President Rouhani to come and and to start speaking just as—

GARY SICK: It was. I thought it was your timing.

DAVID SPEEDIE: I can't thank him directly, but I can thank you.

Audio

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Video Clip

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