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News Release

Negotiating with Iran

New Book Provides Guidelines for U.S.-Iranian Negotiations

For Immediate Release

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Washington, D.C.—As the United States weighs a change of approach toward the Iranian government after thirty years of confrontation, Middle East expert John Limbert steps up with a pragmatic yet positive assessment of how to engage Iran. In *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* (U.S. Institute of Peace Press, September 2009), John Limbert provides clear reasons for the U.S. to renew dialogue with Iran and outlines fourteen principles to guide the American who finds himself in a negotiation—commercial, political, or other—with an Iranian counterpart.

Limbert challenges both Americans and Iranians to end decades of mutually hostile mythmaking and stresses the importance of a mutual cultural and historical understanding. “In exchanges between the two countries, mythology, distortion, grievance, and stereotype have become accepted wisdom, replacing both reason and reality,” says Limbert. “Addressing long-held suspicions and misconceptions on both sides of the negotiating table is imperative to avoiding shortsighted decision making and missed opportunities.”

Drawing lessons from four cases, Limbert advises, “American negotiators who in the future are going to deal with Iranian counterparts should consider carefully the successes and failures of their predecessors. The persistent deep and mutual mistrust that has existed between the two countries since 1979 has meant that negotiators, their judgment too often clouded by real or imagined grievances, have ignored the fundamentals of their craft, and have failed to find objective criteria, calculate BATNAs (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement), and, most important, separate the person from the problem.”

A former Iranian hostage himself, John Limbert writes from a personal and professional viewpoint, combining a deep appreciation and knowledge of Iranian culture and history, first-hand diplomatic experience, and an understanding of what it means to negotiate for the lives of Americans. This unique perspective of U.S.-Iranian relations makes this book an invaluable resource for those faced with redefining U.S. foreign policy toward Iran.

ABOUT THE CROSS-CULTURAL NEGOTIATION SERIES

This book is the eighth in a series of volumes published by the United States Institute of Peace about the negotiating styles of different countries. Previous volumes in the Cross-Cultural Negotiation series have explored Chinese, Russian, North Korean, Japanese, French, German, and Israeli and Palestinian negotiating behavior. These books reflect the Institute's conviction that negotiating approaches to international conflict resolution, as well as less adversarial diplomatic or business encounters, will achieve greater success when negotiators from different nations and cultures better "read" the intentions of their counterparts over a green baize table. In 2010 the Institute will publish the next series volume entitled *American Negotiating Behavior* by Ambassador Richard H. Solomon and Nigel Quinney. Future country studies are in the works, including one on Pakistan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A career Foreign Service officer since 1973, **John W. Limbert** has held numerous positions including deputy coordinator for counterterrorism in the U.S. State Department and ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. In April 2003, while serving as ambassador, he was one of the first American civilian officials to enter Baghdad, where he was responsible for cultural affairs, including restoring the looted Iraqi Museum. Ambassador Limbert holds the Department of State's highest award—the Distinguished Service Award—and the Award for Valor, which he received after fourteen months as a hostage in Iran. He is a distinguished professor of international affairs at the U.S. Naval Academy.

ABOUT THE UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

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Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History

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Negotiating with Iran Questions and Answers

1. Why should the United States bother thinking about Iranian-American negotiations, when, for the last three decades, the two countries' dealings, whether open or secret, direct or indirect, have been mired in futility?

The United States and Iran should be talking because both sides will find significant common interests in so doing. Talking to Iran, hard and disagreeable as it might be, is likely to be more productive than continuing almost three decades of noisy and sometimes violent confrontation. The U.S. should have no illusions. Discussions with the Islamic Republic are unlikely in the short run to have the kind of positive outcomes the U.S. might wish for. Iran is not going to change its behavior immediately and stop all of its misdeeds in the areas of terrorism, Middle East peace, human rights, and nuclear development. Yet through serious negotiations—even with a regime it dislikes and mistrusts—the U.S. may discover areas of common interest that lurk behind walls of hostility and suspicion.

2. Why have Americans and Iranians been unable to get beyond their caricatures of each other, and admit that the denunciations, accusations, finger-pointing, and sterile rhetoric have accomplished nothing?

One answer lies in decades of two-sided mythmaking. Americans and Iranians have constructed their reciprocally negative views based on distorted versions of two recent events. In the Iranian case, the critical event was the August 1953 American-backed coup d'état that toppled the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and restored the power of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. By so doing, the Americans did what the Russians and British had been doing for decades—frustrating Iranians' efforts to free themselves of foreign tutelage, reverse three centuries of political decline, and take control of their country's petroleum, its greatest source of wealth. In the American case, the formative event was the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the holding of mission staff members hostage for fourteen months in 1979-81. The nightly television images of screaming crowds and burning flags, the hysterical rhetoric, the weeping hostage family members, the threats, the refusal to negotiate, the failed rescue mission, and the Iranians' unwillingness to recognize either accepted norms of international behavior or their own responsibilities toward persons under their protection all ensured that Americans, unable to understand such happenings, would dismiss Iranians as "crazies," as victims of a national temper tantrum, and label them with all the negatives noted above. These two seminal events have proved a formidable barrier to building a more constructive relationship.

3. What are some of the myths and negative stereotypical traits that Americans and Iranians attribute to one another?

Based on the last thirty years of history, and our disastrous relations with the Islamic Republic, Americans often characterize Iran and Iranians as:

- Emotional. Iranians let their hearts rule their heads.
- Devious. Iranians will cheat and deceive if it suits their purpose—or sometimes even to no apparent purpose.
- Obsessed with the past. Iranians cannot put past events behind them.
- Obsessed with religion. Iranians are attempting to develop a theocratic state in the twenty-first century based on a version of Mohammed's seventh-century community in Arabia.
- Unreliable. Iranians cannot be trusted to keep their word.
- Incomprehensible. Many Iranian actions are inexplicable.
- Vindictive. Iranians harbor grudges for decades, if not centuries.
- Fanatical. Inspired by stories of martyred saints, Iranians will embark on suicide missions.

From recent past events starting in 1953, Iranians have concluded that the American government remains determined to dominate and exploit Iran, preferably by subversion and other indirect means, but by force if necessary. Subsequent American actions (or Iranians' perception of actions) have confirmed that image of Americans as determined to bend Iranians to their will and prepared to crush their aspirations for dignity and independence. To Iranians, Americans seem no better than Iran's historical enemies, the British and Russians.

4. Is it important that Americans study and know Iranian history and culture in order to understand Iranians? Putting myths aside, what kind of people are the Iranians?

Americans need not be scholars in Iranian history, but they do need to be conscious of Iranian history and culture and their long-term influence. At a minimum, that consciousness will protect the Americans from being confused and surprised by seemingly incoherent and inexplicable Iranian negotiating actions.

Iranians are, like everyone else, the victims of their long history, their unique geography, and other circumstances that have shaped their political and social systems. As Iranians have almost never been able to choose their political system, they have had to adapt—with more or less sincerity—as best they could to whatever system prevailed at the time, whether it was a Turkish sultanate, a Shia empire, a military dictatorship, or a visionary and strident Islamic republic. Yet despite sudden changes in political systems, Iranians have developed distinct cultural traditions that have defied ruler, dynasty, and religion and which are unique, if not special, among nations.

Iranians are also a religious people, with Islam at the heart of Iranian politics and society for a very long time. The relationship between religion and state—what is strictly Iranian versus what is strictly Islamic—remains a complex issue and one that presents seeming contradictions and paradoxes. For example, in the society, there is continuing tension between the austerity demanded by the strict rules of religion—which frowns on music, images, and mysticism—and the realities of an Iranian cultural tradition that elevates all three. This conflict periodically comes to a head when the deepest mourning period of Shia Islam—the lunar month of Moharram—coincides with the national festival of Nowruz, the ancient holiday marking the beginning of spring and the first day of the Iranian solar year. Yet, what for some cultures might be an irreconcilable collision of traditions is, for most Iranians, an opportunity to show themselves to be loyal to both sides of their identities and to be both good Shia Muslims and good Iranians.

5. How has Iran managed to survive as a distinct nation for over twenty-five centuries, despite many foreign conquerors and foreign ideologies?

Adaptability and openness to the ways of outsiders have been keys to Iran's survival as a distinct nation. Iranians have accepted and then mastered foreign customs by giving them a (refined) Iranian form and making them a part of an enriched Iranian culture. Iranians probably owe their survival as a people to their having adopted two "foreign" innovations: the Islamic religion, which linked Iranians to a worldwide community, and the Arabic script, which became the medium for the new Persian language in the tenth century CE.

6. What are the four case studies that form the foundation of this book?

- **The Azerbaijan crisis of 1945–47**, in which the Iranians—although divided among themselves and holding few cards in their hands—successfully balanced competing foreign and domestic interests and preserved their country's independence and territorial integrity against very long odds. With limited American support, Iranians were able to negotiate occupying Soviet troops out of Iran and restore their authority over the country's richest province.
- **The oil nationalization crisis of 1951–53**, in which both the British and Iranians so demonized each other that agreement became impossible. Washington attempted to mediate between its friends and originally had sympathy for the aspirations of the Iranian nationalists. Preoccupied by Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, however, the Americans eventually came to share the British view that Prime Minister Mosaddegh himself was the problem and had to go.
- **The American Embassy hostage crisis of 1979–81**, in which what began as a 1970s-style student demonstration and sit-in became—after a series of misjudgments on both sides—a major international crisis that brought down an American president and enabled extremists in Tehran to seize undisputed power and bring years of bloodshed and suffering on most Iranians.
- **The Lebanon hostage crisis of 1985–91** in which both sides—encouraged by self-interested intermediaries—deluded themselves into unrealistic expectations. Both sides lost sight of underlying interests and focused entirely on immediate goals. When circumstances changed and credible mediators became involved, problems that had previously seemed unsolvable were eventually settled.

The Lessons: Fourteen Steps to Success

1. Establish objective criteria free of legalisms.

For Iranian negotiators the test of an agreement is not whether it conforms to the experts' notions of legality, but whether it can be presented as a victory for Islam and for Iran. Such criteria of course, are subjective and ambiguous, and, in a highly-charged political arena, what one group claims as victory another will call betrayal. The American negotiator, therefore, should look for unambiguous, mutually agreeable standards that avoid legal jargon and technicalities.

2. The past matters: Be aware of Iran's historical greatness, its recent weakness, and its grievances from decades or centuries before.

Whoever negotiates with Iran should be prepared to deal with these contradictory feelings: the belief that others owe Iran deference for its cultural and political glories, and the simultaneous belief that powerful outsiders have betrayed, humiliated, and brutalized a weak Iran and will do so again if given the opportunity.

3. Choose intermediaries with great care.

The last thirty years of American-Iranian contact have featured self-appointed individuals and groups who have acted on their own initiative from more questionable motives. Such persons/groups should be dealt with warily, if at all. They can and will drag their American contacts into the mud of Iranian political swamps and use their contacts to gain respectability and further their own political and financial fortunes.

4. Talk to the right people.

The unique and opaque structure of the Islamic Republic makes it very difficult to understand exactly who has authority and responsibility to make agreements. Negotiators must understand that there are parallel and sometimes competing governing structures within the Islamic Republic: the republican system with the constitution, president, and popular elections, and the revolutionary or theocratic system that operates outside and independent of the formal government structure and its legal limitations.

5. Understand that the Islamic Republic's priority is survival and its leaders' priority is to stay in power.

Iran's leaders see themselves surrounded by enemies seeking their removal and the Islamic Republic's overthrow. The leaders of Iran will do what they believe they must do to ensure their and their regime's survival. Facing this wary view of the world, American negotiators have both a problem and opportunity. On the negative side, American negotiators will encounter an assumption of bad faith and a wall of suspicion and mistrust from Iranian counterparts. On the positive side, a discussion can progress if negotiators can reassure the Iranian side that agreement will not destabilize the Islamic Republic and may, in fact, allow it to survive.

6. Let the Iranians define what is in their national interest.

The Iranian negotiator knows very well what serves his national, partisan, family, and personal interests. Such interest may differ from—and may even contradict—what an outsider, largely unaware of the factional infighting in progress, believes is in Iran's "national interest."

7. Understand the Iranian BATNA: Expect actions that may appear (to you) self-destructive.

It is vital to be aware of the other side's Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, or BATNA¹, as well as one's own. The Iranian BATNA may be difficult to predict, and American negotiators should not convince themselves that "Iranians will never be so foolish as to do X."

8. Give your Iranian counterparts credit for intelligence.

9. Expect a case based on vague and uncertain claims.

With a shortage of diplomatic expertise and lacking a well-trained cadre of support staff, Iranian negotiators will not always be equipped with facts, figures, maps, and precedents with which to make their case.

10. Expect grandstanding, political theater, and flamboyant gestures.

Much of what happens in Iran's political life includes a large element of theater. American negotiators need to sort out grand gesture from substance.

11. Remember that power is respected, weakness despised.

A recurring theme in Iranian history is the respect accorded strong leaders—even blood thirsty ones—who are able to check the powerful centrifugal forces in the society. Leadership is always personal and always charismatic. Iranian respect for power does not, however, mean that American negotiations can rely on threats and intimidation to make a case.

12. Understand that justice, often in a harsh version, in the abstract is extremely important.

In a negotiation, Iranian representatives may frame their demands, not in specific or quantitative terms but in terms that claim, "All we are seeking is justice."

13. Remember that conspiracy theories have great currency—and are sometimes true.

Although some conspiracy theories may appear absurd, behind them lies a deeper reality.

14. Expect hands to be overplayed.

Iranians can appear to discard calculation of advantage and disadvantage and become captives of unrealistic, rigid positions and extremist rhetoric.

¹ The term was coined by Roger Fisher and William Ury in *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

Praise for *Negotiating with Iran*

"Negotiating with Iran should be read not just by foreign service officials but also by academics and general readers interested in U.S.-Iran relations."

—Ervand Abrahamian, Baruch College, CUNY

"This is an excellent book and an important contribution to what is rapidly becoming the central issue in American foreign policy. Limbert draws on years of professional and personal experience to explore and explain the problematic nature of Iran-U.S. relations and to offer coherent and constructive solutions for the future. Limbert is in the enviable position of being able to combine the perspective of a historian with the immediacy of a diplomat who has been at the forefront of America's tragic relationship with Iran, to provide a penetrating yet accessible account of the relationship. This book should be essential reading for students and practitioners alike."

—Ali M. Ansari, University of St. Andrews

"Drawing on his personal observations, interviews with key players, and the historical record, John Limbert has written a thought-provoking study on the experience of negotiating with Iran in the recent past and the lessons the past provides for negotiating with Iran today. This carefully documented essay is both handbook and history—a must read for both government officials who intend to sit at the negotiating table with Iran and all those interested in the tangled record of Iran relations with the West and Russia."

—Shaul Bakhash, George Mason University

"A must-read for anyone who hopes for (or fears) an American reengagement with Iran. Superb diplomatic history focused on lessons learned rather than festering grievances. I hope Iranians read this as well as Americans. Limbert is one of our few genuine Iran experts."

—Richard W. Bulliet, Columbia University

"Well conceived and organized, a major addition to the study of contemporary Iran, this book is compelling reading and is comprehensive in its historical and political reach. The author provides a welcome resource as the United States and other countries begin to consider expanded discussions with the Iranian leadership."

—Nicholas Burns, Harvard University

“Written by an author intimately familiar with the Persian language, history, and customs, this unique work addresses and sets aside many false but widespread preconceptions about Iran, Iranians, and Iranian culture. A useful addition to the literature on Iranian negotiating technique, style, and expectations, and a stand-alone book on the subject, this study is very timely. Iran has emerged as a regional power; on many crucial issues the United States and Iran are at a loggerhead; and the new American administration intends to launch on direct engagement with Iran. For Americans, understanding Iranian negotiating behavior is clearly critical at this juncture.”

—Haleh Esfandiari, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

“John Limbert writes with empathy and honesty about the contentious relationship between Iran and America. He offers deep insights into Iran’s complexities and contradictions, and into the short sightedness and occasional lapses of strategic sense on the part of American policymakers. In the end, he wants to help heal the wounds between Tehran and Washington, and his book is full of wisdom, practical advice, and gentle humor about the former allies, current adversaries.”

—Ellen Laipson, The Henry L. Stimson Center

“An exceptional work and a must-read for anyone working on U.S.-Iran relations. Thoughtful, honest, accessible, and intelligent, John Limbert has provided us with a tremendous service. Not only will this work become the seminal text on Iranian negotiating behavior, but I think this is one of the most important works published on Iran over the last three decades.”

—Karim Sadjadpour, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace