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### **Why the United States Should Exchange Embassies with Iran**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is perhaps America's most tenacious and dangerous enemy, a government with a great deal of American blood on its hands that has sponsored and trained Shia terrorist groups across the Middle East, provided arms that have killed US soldiers and sought to obtain nuclear weapons. In the face of this threat, the official US diplomatic strategy has been to withhold official diplomatic contact and recognition with the intent of delegitimizing and isolating the Iranian government. While it is understandable that the US Government would be resistant to the idea of engaging diplomatically with an enemy like Iran, the question remains of who is actually hurt by the lack of US-Iranian diplomatic relations. This essay would submit that in fact the lack of a US embassy in Tehran hurts the United States and helps Iran by stunting America's ability to conduct either intelligence collection or diplomacy in Iran, creating asymmetries in Iran's favor. Although an exchange of embassies would create some new challenges, these challenges would be manageable and it would ultimately allow the United States to focus more elements of national power on the Iranian regime.

Throughout most of the Cold War, the United States maintained an embassy in Moscow and the Soviet Union maintained an embassy in the United States. Although there were many advantages to maintaining diplomatic contact between the two superpowers, both nations frequently used their embassies for the purpose of intelligence collection. The current lack of a US embassy in Tehran makes it significantly more difficult to gather intelligence in real time on the ground in Iran. The difficulty and risk involved in gathering human intelligence without an

embassy means that the US knows far less about Iran's political, economic and social situation than it could, resulting in less informed decision-making (Baer). Although an Iranian embassy in Washington would present a counterintelligence threat, this would not be fundamentally different from the counterintelligence challenge already created by other foreign embassies. The current situation creates an asymmetry of information in Iran's favor. Iranian cultural and political factors encourage secrecy and opacity on the part of Iran's leadership, and there are significant intelligence gaps regarding Iran because of the difficulty involved in observing Iranian society and politics firsthand (Ibid). By contrast, the United States is an open society where anyone with a computer and a library card can access a great deal of information easily and safely. Consequently, an exchange of embassies would be a much more drastic boost to America's intelligence collection than to Iran's.

A normalization of relations with Iran would create a number of challenges that would, of course, need to be addressed in order to maximize the benefits it would create. A US Embassy in Tehran and its personnel would be subject to a large number of both counterintelligence and physical threats. Embassy personnel would be living in a hostile, authoritarian country where they would likely be subjected to frequent surveillance, elicitation and attempted recruitment, as has happened previously to American personnel stationed within range of a hostile government's influence (Herrington). The Iranian government would no doubt be as ruthless in its targeting of an embassy as the Soviets and their allies, and a robust counterintelligence effort would be a vital necessity. Additionally, Tehran would be a physically hazardous duty station. As seen during the Green Movement demonstrations and at other times in Iranian history, the Iranian government is quite willing to use force to defend its internal stability. American personnel could easily be injured in the event of unrest, either deliberately or collaterally. In the event of

an assault on an American stationed at the Embassy, it might be difficult to assess whether the altercation resulted from deliberate action by the Iranian government or from a group of Basijis exhibiting poor impulse control. The history of the CIA in Iran might also pose some problems. The Iranian government already accuses dissidents of being traitors and blames problems on foreign malfeasance. An American embassy would doubtless become a rhetorical punching bag when convenient. The Iranian government could conceivably expel US personnel for real or imaginary intelligence collection activities, and then cite such personnel as examples of the threats facing Iran. Additionally, an Iranian Embassy in Washington DC would serve as a collection opportunity for Iran, and could pose some level of security threat in its own right.

Despite these formidable challenges, the opportunities created by the presence of an American embassy in Tehran and an Iranian embassy in Washington would be well worth the work involved to mitigate them. The Iranian government would doubtless attempt to make the American Embassy into a target and the Iranian Embassy in the US into an intelligence platform. By doing so, however, it would allow American counterintelligence and security personnel to gain valuable insight into the Iranian security forces and their tactics(Herrington). Given that there is far more open source information about the US security sector than about the Iranian security sector, this would be a relative gain for the United States. The presence of Iranian personnel in the United States would also allow the United States to expand its understanding of the Iranian government, which is much more opaque than the American government (Baer). A diplomatic exchange would reduce the asymmetries in Iran's favor. Just as importantly, an exchange of embassies would implicitly impress upon Iranian diplomats and Iranian citizens the fact that their country could be far more prosperous than it is now if their government was less absolute in its hostility towards the United States. Such awareness could influence the thinking

of Iranian policymakers, and also be an intelligence opportunity for the United States. Many Soviet and East German defectors, after all, were motivated by the hope of finding a better life in the United States (Herrington). Although the Iranian government would likely attempt to cast the US Embassy as a sinister den of imperialist conspiracies, it is questionable how strongly this message would resonate with the sections of the public that are not already anti-American. Such a strategy could easily backfire and make the Iranian government look silly or unreasonable. Even though the Iranian government would probably be at least as aggressive as the Eastern bloc against the US Embassy, there are still real limits to what it could do to diplomatic personnel and their families. US Embassies exist in many countries that are hostile or dangerous, and are able to carry out their duties in spite of a difficult environment. The US Government is by now very familiar with counterintelligence and physical threats to US Embassies, and would probably be able to mitigate them effectively.

Diplomatic non-recognition can be a useful tool when dealing with a new, unstable regime that is still in its formative years and could potentially collapse. However, at this point in time the Iranian regime is thirty years old and in no imminent danger of collapse. There is no rival to recognize as the “true” government of Iran, and the Iranian and American governments already interact indirectly. It is difficult to see how it tangibly benefits the United States to refuse direct diplomatic contact. Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom all have embassies in Tehran, and this does not impede them from joining the US in opposition to Iranian foreign policy. Indeed, Iran is so potentially dangerous that the United States can ill afford not to have an Ambassador in Tehran, for the same reason that the United States and the Soviet Union always wanted diplomatic contact and India and Pakistan continue to maintain their respective embassies. Skillful diplomats can help to encourage restraint and prevent tense political

standoffs from spiraling out of control. They can also provide valuable insight on foreign leadership and how political dynamics can be used for American gain. Iran's political and social structures are much more fragmented than is often realized. Mahmoud Ahmedinajad's incompetent handling of the economy and autocratic management style have alienated even conservative elites, and there are many who question whether the current Iranian foreign policy is the best one for maximizing Iranian influence and security (Fisher/Choksy). Additionally, there is considerable public displeasure with the clerical regime, and a surprisingly strong interest in Western culture and ideas, creating a fertile environment for public diplomacy, which always works best when it can be carefully tailored to the target audience (Rezaian). Refusing to allow an exchange of embassies denies the US useful foreign policy tools while doing little to harm the target regime.

The current lack of diplomatic relations between the US and Iran disrupts intelligence gathering and diplomacy without providing any real benefit. Normalizing relations could allow for a more stable rivalry that would allow forces such as the economy and changing demographics to make Iran weaker relative to the United States (Baer). The US should treat Iran as it did the Soviet Union, maintaining diplomatic facilities to increase its ability to harness all elements of US national power to their fullest. An enemy as dangerous as Iran is worth opposing with all available means, and an exchange of embassies would allow the United States to do exactly that.

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