



LETTERS

Talking with Iran

For the first time in decades, there is the possibility, indeed the probability, of official dialogue between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. President-elect Barack Obama is on record favoring talks with Tehran, when they are in the American interest and at a time and place of our choosing. That language leaves room for the essential preparatory diplomatic maneuvering, including the need for prior consultation with friends at the United Nations Security Council and the European Union — a channel where this past summer, for the first time, there was participation by the U.S. under secretary of State for political affairs.

Still, the process will not be easy. This channel has dealt only with the nuclear issue, where Iran has continued to reject the precondition that it must first suspend its enrichment of uranium. Tehran has already ignored four Security Council resolutions on the subject, reiterating there and elsewhere that its enrichment process is dedicated only to building the basis for production of nuclear energy — a less than plausible claim, given Iran's lack of full transparency in its obligations as a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Meanwhile, the American and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad have had occasional contact, but those exchanges have been desultory at best, specifically limited to a focus on stability in Iraq.

Nonetheless, we may soon be on a

new path in our tortured relations with Iran, which have set a record among diplomatic ruptures. In that regard, some historical background may be useful.

There has been no formal diplomatic contact between the U.S. and Iran since President Jimmy Carter broke relations in April 1980 over the hostage crisis that had begun on Nov. 4, 1979. After five months of secret probes and public frustration, Pres. Carter finally ordered the closure of Iran's embassy in Washington and its consular presence elsewhere and the departure of all resident personnel within 36 hours.

But in Tehran, all American personnel had been taken hostage when the embassy was forcibly overrun, including myself as *chargé d'affaires*, my deputy chief of mission and a security officer. We were held by Iranian Army guards within the foreign ministry, while my Iranian counterpart in Washington, also a *chargé d'affaires*, remained free and in place inside his embassy on Massachusetts Avenue until the formal break in relations in April 1980. It was a most unusual state of half-diplomatic relations between two sovereign nations.

Though I was a hostage, I was determined, until my later solitary confinement, to maintain a facade of diplomatic decency in my capacity as the American *chargé d'affaires*. Somehow I found enough paper to write a stream of formal protests to Iran's officialdom about my treatment and that of my

colleagues — the two in the ministry with me and the 50 others held hostage in the embassy compound on the other side of the city. Surreptitiously handed to guards and contacts within the foreign ministry, the notes may never have reached their addressees. But the mere act of sending them boosted my morale.

Today, nearly 30 years later, I remain the last senior American diplomat to have been accredited and resident in Tehran, in direct contact with the Islamic Republic. During my time, however, there was no opening for the kind of sustained dialogue essential for any diplomatic relationship. Indeed, the one opportunity that did arise proved seriously adverse.

That was the meeting in Algiers on Nov. 1, 1979, between Iran's secular Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski — each heading his country's delegation to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Algerian Revolution.

I had pressed Bazargan hard to go to Algiers because dialogue at that level seemed essential for the still-uncertain relationship between the Khomeini regime and the U.S. Three days after that meeting, radical Iranian students, concerned that Bazargan was taking Iran back into a relationship with the Great Satan, overran our embassy. The rest is history.

There have since been quiet probes and occasional policy initiatives, but all were unsustained and lacked adequate



focus on the not-inconsiderable range of shared regional interests, not least vis-à-vis Iraq. Meanwhile, poisonous rhetoric has ruptured that essential element of diplomacy, mutual trust, that will require years of groundwork to be restored. The path will be long and difficult, but as an old American expression has it, we need to get off the dime and start talking again.

Bruce Laingen
Ambassador, retired
Bethesda, Md.

More Peace Corps Volunteers

The value of the Peace Corps has been underscored in the October and November editions of the *FSJ*, but for too long that value has been limited by insufficient resources. The current number of volunteers is half of what it was four decades ago, and more than 20 countries have pending requests for Peace Corps programs. President-elect Obama has promised to double the size of the Peace Corps, as did President Bush, but without funding this cannot be achieved.

In 2008, the National Peace Corps Association launched a grassroots campaign called MorePeaceCorps to advocate for strengthening the Peace Corps, including doubling its size by 2011. A combination of concerned and prominent Americans including President Jimmy Carter, Senator Chris Dodd, D-Conn., Wisconsin Governor James Doyle and several former ambassadors, myself included, have joined the National Advisory Council of MorePeaceCorps to advance the cause. You can learn more about this effort at www.morepeacecorps.org.

Thomas N. Hull
Ambassador, retired
Grantham, N.H.

The Peace Corps and the FS

The ultimate experience is to serve as a Foreign Service officer in the country where you were a Peace Corps

Volunteer. Depending on how much time has passed between the two experiences, you gain a view through a telescope or a magnifying glass focused on your special country. If there are many years in between, your telescope reveals how history changes people's lives. If it's been a short time, you may have a close-up comparison of in-the-field versus halls-of-power viewpoints. But maybe we just feel that through-the-looking-glass amazement at finding ourselves in such different situations in the very same place!

I was sent to Brazil in 1968 as a community organizer in Nazare das Farinhas (population 20,000) in the northeastern state of Bahia. In 2005, I became the principal officer at the only U.S. consulate in northeast Brazil, Recife. From day one, I ran into former Peace Corps Volunteers and staff working in Brazil, now with USAID, nongovernmental organizations or universities, as well as retirees who had returned to live there. (The Peace Corps left Brazil in the 1970s.) Peace Corps alumni take an active role in helping Brazil address the inequalities and poverty that continue to trouble the giant of Latin America. They make me proud.

Having been a volunteer in Brazil made me very comfortable with all segments of society and more knowledgeable about the country's political divisions. That experience had given me friends who lived exceptional lives and inspired me. I stayed in touch with several of them for more than 30 years.

I applied what I learned in the Peace Corps to my efforts as consul to enable Americans to work with Brazilians for peace, prosperity and justice. What struck me most was how, in the backlands of Brazil's poorest region, people would ask me if I knew "the American" who had lived there some 30 years ago.

Here we see the value of the Peace Corps: Volunteers are remembered

with admiration as true representatives of the United States in places where diplomats rarely go.

Diana Page
FSO
Washington, D.C.

Senior Pay

The list of performance-pay recipients (announced in 08 State 110778) has swollen to over 270 members of the Senior Foreign Service. These bonuses total an estimated \$3 million. Here are observations from one of the smallest tadpoles in State's pond.

These people are the highest-paid employees in the Foreign Service. They receive senior-level salaries to do senior-level jobs. State's pay scale is not secret; people understand government salary limitations when they sign up.

Yet seniors receive an additional 20.89 percent, once called locality pay, no matter where they work worldwide. This serious money is denied to the majority of FS employees overseas who work side by side with seniors, who suffer the same hardships and who go home to smaller houses. The unfairness of this policy is so egregious that AFSA has vigorously battled it for years. Perhaps to calm ruffled feathers, State eliminated the term "locality pay" and the extra cash was folded into seniors' base pay. As if hiding it makes it more palatable.

Seniors point out that they don't receive step increases. What they *don't* point out is that they instead compensate themselves with pay-for-performance increases that far exceed any step increase. The bar is set low enough that a child could step over it: their performance must merely be "satisfactory." By the time someone becomes a senior, shouldn't the expectation be that their performance will be far better than that?

But I digress. Let's not confuse pay-for-performance increases with performance pay bonuses.



There was probably a time when performance pay meant something special, a time when the list was shorter and could almost be justified. Today, however, when embassies worldwide must identify painful cuts and freeze real jobs — threatening our ability to meet mission goals — laddling out millions of dollars in bonuses to our highest paid employees feels irresponsible and, frankly, grotesque.

In rewarding exceptional performance by seniors, why not use the Awards Program — the mechanism used for the rest of us. Awards are transparent, requiring nominations and committee decisions. Where is the transparency in performance pay bonuses? The group deciding who gets them is a subset of the group receiving them. Nice arrangement!

Doling out bonuses is not part of a struggle to retain seniors leaving for lucrative private-industry jobs. Statistics don't back that argument. And when the list becomes as bloated as it has, it is clearly no longer an issue of identifying the true standouts either.

Real leadership comes from above, and real leaders lead by example. We are all public servants, accountable to taxpayers. Is it really ethical to spend millions on bonuses for those who are already at the top of State's pay scale?

*Linda Ingalls
Office Management
Specialist
Embassy Pretoria*

Voice of Experience on Mid-Level Hiring

Contrary to Kevin Stringer's assertions in his October 2008 Speaking Out column, "Mid-Level Hiring and the War for Talent," bringing in all new FSOs at entry-level grades is good human resource management. The circumstances surrounding the handling of a prior mid-level hiring program show why.

Allow me to quote a State memo of

Nov. 14, 1983, in which then-Director General Joan Clark wrote to then-Secretary George Shultz recommending that the mid-level program be shut down:

"Mid-level appointees usually require a prolonged adjustment period to become familiar with Foreign Service procedures, such as administrative and consular regulations, and to develop effective reporting techniques. The lack of prior Foreign Service experience will usually place mid-levels at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis their colleagues of the same grade, who have generally been in the Service five to eight years and have had the opportunity to develop basic FS skills. In the consular and administrative fields, in particular, Class 3 officers are likely to have significant supervisory responsibilities which assume prior in-Service experience."

The memo continues: "The appropriateness and necessity of a mid-level entry program are often questioned by those officers who have entered at the junior ranks through the highly competitive examination process. Since the recruitment of officer candidates at the mid-level has resulted in a reduced need for officers at the grades of FS-2 and -3, we have been obliged to make significant downward adjustments in promotion opportunities for junior officers."

Ambassador Clark's criticisms of the mid-level hiring program were not those of a management theoretician or armchair diplomat. They were the criticisms of the DG who worked with the program, an officer with 38 years of experience. Her comments on the particular inappropriateness of mid-level hiring in consular and administrative fields should not be brushed off. After all, she had spent most of her career in the administrative field, and her understanding of consular work was so deep that, after finishing up as DG, she was selected to serve as assistant secre-

tary for consular affairs. I am unaware of any proponent of mid-level hiring whose qualifications to offer an opinion come close to Amb. Clark's.

*William E. Shea
FSO
Consulate General
Nuevo Laredo*

England in the Muslim World

Among many others over the decades, *Foreign Service Journal* contributors have researched and commented upon U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Especially significant are Amb. Chas W. Freeman Jr.'s "America in the World" (November 2008) and Dr. Frederic Grare's "The Pakistan Piece of the Puzzle" (July-August 2008).

In my view — as someone who lived through the birth of our ally Israel, the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan — most of the charges and countercharges regarding U.S. involvement and the seemingly perpetual nightmarish problems fall well short of the mark. Perhaps weak institutional memory is at fault.

Although the U.S. has positioned itself at the center of this stage, everyone seems to have forgotten that, without reference to Washington, Great Britain created the contemporary Middle East as a result of her defeat of the Ottomans in World War I. Unfortunately, the new nations could be said to have been stillborn, remaining under colonial domination for some time. Much of the stillborn quality continues.

As Dr. Grare reminds us, the British merely drew a boundary in 1893, the Durand Line, in India's Northwest Territories that incorporated part of Afghanistan into what 54 years later would become Pakistan. Then, of course, Pakistan itself was created similarly. Chaos, death and ill feeling ensued and continue. Britain should remain responsible for orienting these regions, yet somehow the ball and most of the bill have been passed to the

LETTERS



American people.

For the Middle East, I would recommend an international conference chaired by Her Majesty's Government and, assuming they'd want to be involved, co-chaired by the Turks, with all affected nations attending. The United Nations or the U.S. could be the host, and the purpose would be to address and resolve the many nagging difficulties created by Britain in the first place. (Should France be a co-chair or invited? I'd leave that to Britain and the other conferees.)

As for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, I see a similar conference chaired by the United Kingdom, with the active participation of the three states. Hosting could be similar. In both cases, if not the host, the U.S. should be an observer.

I write on Veterans Day 2008, 90 years since Britain reorganized the Middle East; about 115 years since the Durand Line was drawn; and 61 since the independence of India and Pakistan. Why the American people should be trapped by the results of British imperialism is a question that requires answers. As I recall, the U.S. itself opted out of that arrangement 232 years ago.

Now that change is in the air, surely it's time Washington returned the ball to 'the lads' for them to 'give it a go.'

Louis V. Riggio
FSO, retired
Hollywood, Fla. ■

CORRECTION

Due to an editing error, the first sentence of John Dickson's vignette in the article "From the Peace Corps to the Diplomatic Corps, Part II" (November) incorrectly identified his Peace Corps service. He was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Gabon from 1976 to 1979, not in Bulgaria from 2001 to 2003. We regret the error.



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