Engaging Iran: Lessons from the Past

Patrick Clawson

May 2009

In the thirty years since Iran's Islamic Revolution, which resulted in the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Western governments have repeatedly tried to engage Tehran. This collection of essays, the product of a special colloquium hosted by The Washington Institute in March 2009, analyzes four such periods of diplomatic activity:

- The full diplomatic relations achieved between the United States and Iran's 1979 revolutionary government within the latter's first ten months of ascendance
- The covert outreach to Iran in the mid-1980s by senior U.S. officials
- U.S. and European efforts to improve Western-Iranian relations after Muhammad Khatami was elected to the Iranian presidency in 1997
- Post-September 11 U.S. and European outreach to Iran in pursuit of common interests.

Despite the achievement of some limited results, each of these efforts ultimately failed -- some spectacularly so. What, then, are the lessons to be gleaned from the historical record of Western engagement with Iran's Islamic Republic?

In Engaging Iran: Lessons from the Past, senior policy practitioners representing both Western and Iranian points of view join longtime observers of Iranian politics to offer timely advice to the Obama administration for shaping a proactive and effective U.S. Iran policy.

CONTENTS

- Riding the Tiger: The View from Tehran in 1979 / John Limbert
- The Importance of Iran's Domestic Political Atmosphere / Mohsen Sazegara
- Engage Iran in Secret and Use a High-Level Envoy / Paul Thompson
- Know Your Adversary, but Be True to Yourself / Nicholas Rostow
- Engaging Iran: Strategic Goal or Means to an End? / Ellen Laipson
- Thirty Years of EU-Iran Relations: Business Trumps Politics / Ahmad Rafat
- Changing Iranian Behavior: Lessons from the Bush Years / Michael Singh
- Lessons from the EU-Iran Comprehensive Dialogue / Sir Richard Dalton
- Talking to Tehran: Context and Process Matter Most / Geoffrey Kemp
- Broad Lessons from Thirty Years of U.S.-Iranian Interaction / Karim Sadjadpour
- Ripe with Possibilities? / Patrick Clawson

THE EDITOR

Patrick Clawson is director of research at The Washington Institute and senior editor of Middle East Quarterly. An economist who focuses on Iran, he served previously as a senior research professor at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies and as a senior research economist at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Dr. Clawson is the author or editor of twenty-five books and monographs, including The Last Resort: Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran (The Washington Institute, 2008, with Michael Eisenstadt). In addition, he has published more than seventy articles about the Middle East and international economics.

48 pages