

Brzezinski and Yazdi, Three Decades Later

Two diplomats pick up a discourse put on hold for 30 years.

The Changing Face of Iran

By Christopher Dickey | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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In late October, 1979, U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski met with Iran's Foreign Minister, Ebrahim Yazdi in Algiers to discuss how to improve relations between their countries. The Iranians wanted the U.S. to extradite Iran's monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who had been overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in February and was in exile in New York while being treated for cancer. Under the Shah, Iran was a chief ally and oil supplier to the United States, but many Iranians regarded him as a corrupt dictator and pawn of the West. At that meeting, according to notes taken by Robert Gates, now the Secretary of Defense, Brzezinski offered to recognize the revolutionary Islamic government and restore normal relations if Iran would abandon its demands for the U.S. to extradite the Shah. But a week later, revolutionaries stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, initiating the 444-day hostage crisis that severed Iranian-American relations for three decades. Brzezinski and Yazdi spoke to Newsweek's Christopher Dickey via conference call earlier this month to address the current state of Iranian-American relations:

Ebrahim Yazdi: Hi. Dr. Brzezinski.

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Zbigniew Brzezinski: Hello Dr. Yazdi. How are you?

Yazdi: Oh, I'm just fine.

Brzezinski: It's been a long time.

Yazdi: Thirty years ...

Christopher Dickey: Did either of you think when you met in Algiers that it would be 30 years until the next time you talked?

Brzezinski: Probably not... You know there may be some conflicting historical memories that are at work. Also some painful events that still have a burdening impact on popular attitudes. But I think the important thing to remember these days is that if there's going to be any serious dialogue between Iran and America, we mustn't linger too much on past historical analogies because that in itself is only fit to stimulate bitter memories.

Yazdi: I agree that there are two historical events that still linger. One is the military coup of 1953 against the nationalist government of Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh. Many Iranians considered that incident to have

suffocated democracy in Iran in a very embryonic stage. The second event--a very painful event--is the hostage taking. However, I believe that we should not emphasize the past. We should look forward. There are many common interests that the United States and Iran can cooperate [on] to resolve some of the regional conflicts.

Dickey: Is there a point where it would help for either or both sides to say they're sorry?

Brzezinski: I don't think it's productive to start a discussion that way. The issue is what are the common interests, what are the dangers we ought to avoid, how can we best proceed to engage in serious discussions? Discussions of who is going to apologize for what and how the apologies are going to be worded and what they're supposed to convey is a prescription for getting sidetracked, bogged down and producing more antagonism.

Yazdi: Yes. The major point here is whether there is a will on both sides to overcome these obstacles and problems. In recent events, like when Iran cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan in overthrowing the Taliban regime and bringing all the Afghan factions together, the former American administration failed to grab the opportunity to get closer to Iran. That was an indication that there was a lack of will to reconcile. My own feeling is that President Obama is honest in trying to overcome these problems. In Iran, there is a will to come and negotiate with American authorities in order to resolve the problems. These are signs of hope for the future.

Brzezinski: That's all good and well and I agree very much with it, but even in this very reasonable packaging that you, Dr. Yazdi, just produced, you referred to American apologies specifically. You referred to American failures to pick up Iranian offers of a willingness to negotiate seriously, but you said nothing about the Iranian side expressing apologies for, for example, the hostage-taking or some actions that themselves were not contributory to a negotiating relationship. So I would suggest that we really do avoid focusing so much on the question of the past, I think that you are right in saying that President Obama has shown a willingness to open up. It would be nice to have also some very explicit and equally eloquent statements to that effect from our Iranian interlocutors.

Yazdi: In the meantime, in order to prepare ground for negotiation on both sides, I suggest that the United States government take steps via a U.S. Interests Section in the Swiss embassy in Tehran and process visa applications right here. There are thousands of Iranians every year who want to go and visit their relatives in the United States, and there is a very strong hardship imposed on them. They have to go to various countries, spend time and money and sometimes their approach is not effective. This practical step could pave the way for more meaningful negotiation on all the issues that both sides are concerned with.

Brzezinski: I agree with that. However, let me come back again to the issue of how we proceed. Since we basically agree that there is a list of issues to be considered, one way to begin is for the sides to start drawing up a set of issues that could be discussed in different working groups. Hopefully movement in some groups would facilitate movement on other issues, which may prove more resistant to progress. On the nuclear issue, it would probably be easier to deal with if there is progress in mutual understanding of common security interests in the region. The United States has obvious security concerns because we're engaged. Iran has very obvious security interests because it's right there. If there's progress on these issues I think some of the concerns on the nuclear issue could also be resolved. I think it is a positive fact that Iran proclaims officially that it is not seeking nuclear weapons, and its religion forbids it from having nuclear weapons. Given the Iranian position on this issue, it's easier for us to say to the Iranians, that's very reassuring, but international affairs being what they are, let's see if we can find a formula whereby it would be easier for us to accept at face value these assurances. With patience and some goodwill on both sides, this very difficult issue could be constructively addressed.

Dickey: Different parties are going to try and disrupt this delicate process of talks or preliminary talks, precisely the kind of arrangements that you're suggesting.

Brzezinski: That's quite true. We have to be aware of the fact that there will be great difficulties, sometimes from the inside of both countries.

Yazdi: Speaking about pressure groups who are against the improvement of relations, I would like to ask Dr. Brzezinski's views on how powerful the Israeli lobby is in the United States, in preventing the initiation of a negotiation between the two countries.

Brzezinski: I would say that we shouldn't overestimate that. The President had overwhelming support in the American-Jewish community, even though he was campaigning on the notion that he wants to explore negotiations with a variety of countries with which the United States has had disagreements, Iran included. There is also a large majority of American Jews who want a peace settlement in the Middle East. Right now the President enjoys considerable support in the country and has a degree of leeway that gives him the opportunity to explore constructively the possibility of a mutual accommodation with Iran.

Dickey: Isn't it a problem, Dr. Yazdi, that when you have the kind of rhetoric that we've heard from President (Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad about the Israeli state, certainly it's fair for the Israelis to take that very seriously and to

feel that this is not a government that can be negotiated with.

Yazdi: We should not give too much attention to this rhetoric. Even in the height of real negotiation, one may observe such rhetoric in order to influence the path of negotiation. But many Iranians are seriously concerned about what is going on in the Middle East.

Brzezinski: I think it's important not to interject too many issues into the American/Iranian dialogue. But since the issue of Israel has come up, I think it has to be noted that the rhetoric used by President Ahmadinejad has been destructive, negative and, I sense, profoundly embarrassing to many Iranians. It flies directly into conflict with well-known historical fact, that what happened in World War II was a crime beyond parallel in history.

Dickey: Is there anything that ordinary Americans and ordinary Iranians can do to push this process forward, Dr. Yazdi? Would it be wise for more Americans to visit Iran?

Yazdi: Well maybe not at the moment, but for sure if negotiations could be initiated then there are many other practical steps to take, not only for Americans to come and visit Iran, but also for many Iranian scientists, and scholars to come and visit the United States. As you may know, during the former administration, there were a lot of restrictions on travel for Iranian scientists.

Dickey: Iran is always saying it wants respect. What else do they want from the United States?

Yazdi: Of course they want respect. But President Obama has said that one cannot assess whether there is respect or not unless you get involved in the negotiation. Many Iranians feel that as far as dealing with other countries like Iran, the United States has sort of a "big brother" attitude. People are very sensitive to that to the extent that sometimes they are hesitant to participate. I carefully read Dr. Brzezinski's book on global leadership and global domination. Global leadership must come in a very natural way through global cooperation and participation. In the global village, peace and tranquility and progress for all parties, whether it is the United States or a small country, require cooperation.

Brzezinski: I think we have to realize that we are in this world together. We have to live it in together by cooperation and mutual respect. Dr. Yazdi, it's been a pleasure to talk to you.