

April 2011**TALKING TO THE ENEMY: CREATING NEW STRUCTURES FOR NEGOTIATIONS**Gabrielle Rifkind

For the purpose of this paper, I will review the Iran-U.S. conflict through a psychosocial lens. Much has been written about the realpolitik and strategic calculations involved on both sides, and there is a vast amount of literature on the technical nuclear questions. This paper will be written from the lens of human security, and what would it look like if we better understood what was in the minds of the “enemy” and why the history of the negotiations and the individual history of each country have led to profound misunderstanding, frustration, and a potential further escalation of the conflict. Negotiations, while always involving political posturing, compromise, and hard deals, are also about people, respect, and collective memories. Without each side trying to understand the other’s history of trauma we will continue to see the same old power play which fails to understand the emotional agenda that shapes the political discourse. This paper examines what would it take to reframe the conflict, how both sides could move away from the language of the enemy and instead search for areas of common interest. It will also explore what new structures could be put in place for a sustainable negotiating process.

We see the world the way we do not because that is the way it is, but because we have these ways of seeing.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

I recently watched Errol Morris’ 2003 documentary “The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara”. It reminds us that 160 million people were killed in the 20th century as a result of political violence. The interviewee, Secretary of Defence under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, then challenges us by asking whether we have learned any lessons for the 21st century. His authority to speak evokes painful sentiments: McNamara was one of the leading architects of the Vietnam War, which saw over 3 million Vietnamese and 85,000 U.S. soldiers killed. His most powerful message is that we did not understand empathy. We did not know what was in the minds of the enemy, how they were thinking. We were fighting different wars, he says. We were fighting the Cold War while they were fighting a civil war, and against a colonial power. The foundation of much conflict he says is about misunderstanding, misjudgement and mismanagement.

When the word empathy is used, this does not mean sympathy or agreeing with the enemy. We might not like their behaviour and we may feel extremely uncomfortable with their value system. What this means instead is getting into the mind of the other. Without being able to do this, our capacity to make strategic calculations will be deeply flawed. “Enough of this empathy story”, I hear my colleagues at the

British Foreign Office saying, “Offers of respect and empathy will only be pocketed by the Iranians in their bazari-style negotiations.” “We will be left and manipulated in the negotiating game”. And yet, when I speak to the Iranian political leaders or Iranian government officials, I hear that same story of how both sides feel taken advantage of, manipulated and misunderstood.

The collective stories that societies tell about themselves become part of the political narrative and therefore ultimately affect how nations see themselves. Therefore to fully understand Iran’s current political posturing, it has to be put in the context of its history, of the way history has shaped the political culture and Iran’s distrust of Western governments.

Whilst the current regime in Iran with its Islamic revolutionary ideology may make a full relationship with the West problematic, is there still scope for finding an accommodation that recognises the security concerns of all parties involved. For this purpose, understanding the motivations of the other will be of key importance. It needs to be recognised that Iran is much more multi-faceted and complex in its thinking than is often communicated. It is proud not to lose face in the world and historically extremely sensitive to external intervention or control of the agenda.

The Iranian-US Relationship

The absence of diplomatic representation with neither the U.S. nor Iran having embassies on each other’s soil for 30 years has created a profound sense of misunderstanding about the motivations and mindsets of the other. Political judgements became increasingly based on distant observation of each other’s behaviour as opposed to in-depth exchange of ideas between policy-makers of both sides. The isolation of Iran by the U.S. since the hostage crisis of 1979-81 has been counterproductive for mutual understanding. The lack of contact extends to the highest levels in both societies.

Both sides see themselves engaged in a Manichean struggle, a fight of good versus evil, and are stuck in a mindset where they cannot accept each other. It is in this context that both sides will use tactics available to disrupt the other. In Iranian eyes, the U.S. has huge military power; it has technology in the form of worms and bugs, and suspects Israel of being responsible for its assassination of nuclear scientists. The Iranians do not have equal military assets and therefore see it as legitimate to use whatever assets available, e.g. meddling in Afghanistan or giving financial and military support to groups hostile to Western interests, such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Historical experiences bear strong influence on the current political discourse in Iran. According to Fariborz Mokhtari, Chair of Persian Gulf Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, “For Iranians, geopolitical realities together with national psychology define national security.”ⁱ Obama’s understanding that it is the respect for contending historical narratives, and an end to bickering about that has suffered the most, is prerequisite to building on common interest.ⁱⁱ

The US/UK perceived overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 is all part of the story and continues to live on in Iran’s collective memory. Iranians still see the British as the puppet masters, pulling the strings coming from a position to do them harm. On the other hand, the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979 is still a running sore in the US psyche, with memories of humiliating images of captured Embassy staff being paraded blind-folded before angry, jeering crowds shouting ‘death to America’. Thus, there is a need to address and heal past wounds.

Western governments also tend to underestimate the significance of the Iran-Iraq War of the Iranian psychology and how it is part of the collective narrative that they were left isolated by the international community. “Those people who survived massacres have now reached the levers of power”ⁱⁱⁱ. Iraq used chemical weapons on Iran, which at first was greeted by general indifference by the world community. Iraq unleashed chemical weapons, not only against the Iranians, but also against the Iraqi Kurds in

Halabja. U.S. governance officials will not easily forget a chilling communiqué released by the Iraqi government, which at the time of the Second Battle of al-Faw stated that “for every insect, there is a proper insecticide”.^{iv} The U.S. then finally condemned the use of chemical weapons against Iranians.

Iran’s continued preoccupation with the consequences of the Iran–Iraq war and its impact on the Iranian psyche can be well observed in the speeches of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In his reply to Obama’s Nowrooz speech 2009 - seen by the West as hardline in turn - Khamenei said, “They gave Saddam the green light to attack our country. That was another measure taken by the US to harm our nation. If Saddam had not received the green light from the US, most probably he would not have attacked our borders. An eight-year war was imposed on our country, during which about 300,000 Iranian civilians and youth were martyred.” He continues in his speech to say, “They congratulated the Iranian nation on Norouz, but in the same message they accused the Iranian nation of supporting terrorism, seeking nuclear weapons, and things like that.”^v

To the ears of the West, Khamenei’s speech is full of reprisals and toxic rhetoric. It is further compounded by the often provocative language of Ahmadinejad who has replaced the conciliatory language of his predecessor President Khatami with crude often provocative language towards the US and Israel. But it foremost needs to be seen as a political calculation to reinforce the identity of the Islamic Republic, which, among many other aspects, is built on reproach and a deep sense of victimization. Here we see how the events that took place over 30 years, not least for the level of suffering, are shaping the current narrative.

Status Quo and Why there is no Impetus to Review the Situation

Currently, there is no political motivation to discuss a new approach toward Iran. This in part can be seen as a result of the other fires burning in the region and the need to respond to immediate crises. Iran has moved down the international agenda, not only due to current events in the Middle East, but also because of a general consensus that the timetable on Iran is a lesser priority due to delays, sanctions, and sabotage. Whilst government officials recognise that there have been stalemates in the nuclear talks since 2005, the current containment policy is reinforcing the status quo, which may not be useful to help finding a resolution to the conflict.

The motivation to rethink policy on Iran has also been placed as lower priority because western intelligence currently assesses that Iran so far has not taken the decision to weaponise. Most security analysts now agree, “Iran is aiming for a nuclear weapons *capability* but has not yet made the political decision to cross the nuclear weapons threshold”^{vi}. According to the latest intelligence on Iran’s nuclear programme, presented by DNI Clapper in a prepared testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, “Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons”^{vii}. And this is seen to be an open secret, as discussed in the Knesset. In Meir Dagan’s valedictory comments as intelligence chief quoted by the Israeli press in 2011 that Iran is unlikely to build a nuclear weapon before 2015^{viii}.

According to Peter Jenkins, UK ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna from 2001 to 2006: “Despite it having become increasingly doubtful since 2003 that Iran’s leaders are committed to acquiring nuclear weapons, the US administration *continues* to base its policy on the assumption that Iran is seeking such weapons and thus constitutes a proliferation threat . The administration therefore stresses Iranian non-compliance with international obligations (most of which, originally conceived as confidence-building measures, have been created for Iran by the Security Council) and approaches Iran from a penal perspective.” In other words, he argues, the US mindset leads the administration to have a marked preference for coercion over persuasion – to invest much more effort into winning international support for sanctions than into seeking through imaginative

diplomacy ways in which Iran could create confidence in its stated non-intention to acquire nuclear weapons, without losing face.

Why is it So Difficult to Think Outside the Box in Terms of Iranian Diplomacy?

The current U.S. position seems to be risk-averse, with France even more cautious to defend Washington's line. There seems to be nothing new in the intelligence picture that is sufficiently worrying to prepare a rethink. Whilst the revolutions in the Middle East are making it difficult for policy-makers to see Iran as priority, one needs to recognise the danger of rethinking policy only in a climate of crisis management. Iran has on occasions expressed its interest in strategic dialogue with the U.S., however, according to former British ambassador to Iran Sir Richard Dalton, this "is meaningless since they the U.S. are unable to formulate a position, or propose a path to follow"^{ix}.

The political impasse needs to be framed in a systemic analysis of a number of interlocking factors that are creating this paralysis. The current political discourse in Iran is one of resistance politics, perhaps not least increased so because of all the internal tensions, political rivalries and power plays at work. It currently suits Iran to pursue a path of defiance and draw strength from this identity. Whilst sanctions may be hurting, the power elites are able to circumvent them. And there are many who say that it has worked to strengthen the Revolutionary Guard. In contrast, the more powerless in Iranian society are the recipients of the pain of the financial sanctions. Many analysts believe that Iran will never negotiate from a position of weakness and therefore the "dual-track" policy of punishment and negotiations is unlikely to succeed.

New thinking is further inhibited by Israel's insistence that negotiations need to involve a policy of no-enrichment in Iran, and anything less is unacceptable. It would be negligent to dismiss Israeli worries about a nuclear-armed Iran. The challenge however is to reframe the negotiations in a way that they offer a possibility for a breakthrough *and* address Israel's concerns. The real danger in this conflict is the combustible combination of Iran's defiance and Israel's panic, which are fuses for a war that could destroy all of Obama's other ambitions.^x

This is further compounded by the U.S. own domestic difficulties and its need to focus on crisis management in the Middle East. Under this administration and before the next elections, there will seem to be little appetite to expand political capital on the Iranian issue, which creates divisions within the U.S. Whilst the EU has already played a leading role in the negotiations through the P3, which include Britain, France and Germany, it could now take a more active role again. However, France is taking a more hardline position in terms of the negotiations and seems to have little appetite for reviewing its position. In addition to this, both Russia and China are content with the current status quo, and seem to have little political motivation to recalibrate their positions at this stage.

Whether the climate or timing is currently right for negotiations, at this moment is in part influenced by the shift in the regional dynamics. Iran currently uses a language to suggest that it sees itself in an increased position of power. Voices within the Iranian government have taken credit for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and yet there is a contradiction here, as neither is driven by religious agendas. Iran itself has had a strong muscular response to its protestors and has not allowed the voice of the people to be expressed with hundreds of riot police, paramilitary Basijis imposing a rod of iron on the demonstrators. From an Iranian perspective, it sees the Western position to be weaker, given the current difficulties both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this context it remains questionable whether Iran sees any need to compromise at this stage.

Negotiations

The current Western analysis of Iran's position is that those in power are stonewalling and being deceptive. The style of the negotiations seems to be trapped in a particular mindset, in which it is

difficult for both sides to think outside the box and approach the issue in a new way. They have seemed to be conducted in a climate of *positional* bargaining, where the 5+1 have made very clear they have preconditions. This is the traditional model of negotiation, where the side with the most power tries to impose its agenda on the other. Iran however has resisted this mode of negotiation for a long time, as it is very sensitive to its level of influence. Hence there might now be a case to explore negotiating in a climate of *principal* bargaining without agenda, in a search for common interest. It should not be forgotten that over the last 30 years, there have been a series of successful Western-Iranian negotiations^{xi}.

One aspect essential to understanding the negotiations is to identify how the different cultural experiences shape the negotiations and can lead to profound levels of misunderstanding. The Western style of negotiation is based on a linear narrative, in which there is a focus and logic that is shaped by an agenda. It is very time-limited, with a heavy emphasis on content. Culturally, the Iranians are more process-orientated and some Iranian analysts believe that the style of negotiation is antithetical to trying to create a conducive environment to building relationships and potentially increasing the trust. Scope for increased informality and building personal relationships might be part of helping to shift the current dynamic.

The success of negotiations however does not depend solely on international dynamics. They are as much influenced by the domestic divisions Iran has experienced over the last six years. Until 2005, Iran's political elites were united by a general consensus on the right/need of nuclear technology for Iran. Since the early years of Ahmadinejad's presidency however, discussions emerged on whether the nuclear programme's costs, increased by sanctions, were still justifiable. The prospects of a future deal has increasingly turned into an instrument of domestic power bargaining.

These internal tensions between the conservatives are illustrated by Ahmadinejad's criticism and successful blocking of talks between Ali Larijani and the Bush administration in 2007^{xii}. The roles were reversed when in 2009 Ahmadinejad was in favour of a deal with the West, with the intention of increasing his leadership status and popular support after the 2009 crackdown on protestors. This time, Larijani and a coalition of conservatives and reformists thwarted prospects of a deal^{xiii}. These domestic rivalries are a key component to the state of readiness of the Iranian regime as a dealmaker. However ultimately if a deal does go it is because the Supreme Leader has ruled against it, as he is perfectly capable of setting the wrangling aside and deciding in favour of an agreement.

What Would a Different Kind of Negotiation Look Like?

For good reasons, we allow our friends to do things that we do not allow our enemies to do. We fear the enemy will do us harm, and this perceived threat makes us feel weak and powerless. We also think that other is responsible for our suffering, and we want those we hate to suffer as much as us. We like to win, and we draw satisfaction from humiliating the other side. Therefore, in international politics, we side with our friends and create as many obstacles as possible for the enemy. All these psychological factors sit in the way of peacemaking.

So this is what makes empathy so difficult and is part of the irrational agenda that ultimately shapes any strategic calculation. We behave as if peacemaking is a rational process, but ultimately it is highly influenced by the history and trauma of the conflict, which is why objectivity in the search for mutual interests is so difficult to achieve. Thereby, in order to deepen our understanding about the level of entrenchment of the Iranian-Western conflict, it will be necessary to understand the psychosocial factors that have shaped it.

There is a basic paradox embedded in these negotiations. We demand higher criteria of accountability of Iran, because they are our enemy and because we do not trust them. Hence we say, "If you show us that

we can trust you, we will respond to some of your concerns". Put another way, we will accept your enrichment capability if the rest of the relationship is in better shape. This way, we expect the other to be the first to take a risk, while they trust us no more than we trust them. By making an agreement dependent on the other's trust without engaging in confidence-building, we ultimately block progress. Without confidence-building on *both* sides neither will take the necessary risks and both will stay entrenched in their current polarized positions.

The current negotiating position is problematic, both for its style and content. Because the negotiators are politically at senior levels and are managing several conflicts simultaneously, they have a short time frame to participate in the talks. These time-limited meetings do not last more than one to two days, with pressure to stick to a focused agenda. No space is constructed to pay attention to real fears and anxieties, carried by each side and clearly influencing the ability to reach an accommodation. Whilst a strategic chess game is at play, with both sides being tough bargainers, there still needs to be a mechanism that addresses the emotional or irrational agenda sitting in the way of finding a compromise.

The nature of the negotiating table is such that the E3+3 outnumber the Iranians. It could be argued the Iranians feel an increased sense of prestige as a result of senior representation from the US, France, Germany, the UK, China and Russia. However, they will also experience the asymmetry of this unequal power relationship and this is likely to stimulate defensive behaviour. This is counterproductive to finding areas of common agreement.

In the last meeting in Istanbul, there was disappointment that the Iranians brought nothing to the table; they were seen to be talking in generalities, avoiding any substantive issues. One way around would be to construct a frame of regular meetings, e.g. on a monthly basis. This would give space for the teams to go back to their countries and engage with all the different political tensions that are obstructing any forward movement. If the negotiations were to work on building confidence and as a result of this improving the working relationships, the team of negotiators might work jointly on how to present ideas which might lead to a breakthrough in their home countries. Clearly, the domestic power dynamics and internal political differences, whether in Iran or the US, are crucial here, and can present an obstacle to new thinking.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section do not deal with any of the technical nuclear issues, but explore mechanisms in which to build trust:

A new frame could be established to create a different climate for the negotiations, based more on a collaborative model and less on an adversarial frame. The idea might seem antithetical to the current climate of the negotiations. However President Obama may find it suitable to make a statement such as: "This conflict is too serious not to establish a proper framework for negotiations. We will work together with the Iranians to find an outcome that addresses the security anxieties of all the parties involved". In this context, new structures could be created to strengthen the frame of the negotiations. These could look as follows:

- 1) **A continuous process** would need to be established, in which the official negotiators can delegate to working groups. These groups would focus on the details of the nuclear issue and beyond, to eventually come up with new ideas to break the deadlock. Working groups could be set up e.g. on Iraq, Afghanistan and the narcotics issue. They would meet on a regular basis, irrespective of tensions between the different parties. It would be essential that any ideas developed in the working groups are reported back to the senior negotiators. Such a process would supplement the high-level talks, which happen on a regular but less frequent basis.

- 2) At the **official negotiations, a smaller group** would sit around the table in order to create a more symmetrical relationship. Currently, the structure of the E3+3 in negotiations with Iran creates an imbalance in the power dynamic. It would be necessary for the E3+3 countries to find a mechanism for smaller representation; this could create a number of trust issues among the E3+3, but once resolved could be conducive to finding new solutions.
- 3) **A regional table** could be set up. In the first instance, its focus could be a sustainable peace process for the Afghan conflict. While the dialogue does not relate to the nuclear issue, senior Iranian representation would sit around the table and work closely together with other parties on a conflict that directly affects Iran. The table would also include Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and may be complemented by a larger group which would include the US, NATO, the EU, Russia and China^{xiv}.
- 4) As an alternative to the government working groups, **a small group of very experienced diplomats could sit together outside the official negotiating process**. The purpose would be to create a less formal environment where relationships of trust could be built and new openings could be explored. Key to the effectiveness of such an initiative would be that these diplomats had very clear lines of communication to the official negotiators. (Oxford Research has been working for the past three years to create a group of senior diplomats with very strong relationships with both the US and UK government. Among others this includes Gianni Picco, who negotiated the end of the Iran-Iraq war.)
- 5) A **sub-regional nuclear weapon free zone** could be installed. Iran, Egypt and other Arab states, all of which have adhered to the NPT, have been pushing since the 1970s for a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East, including Israel. Israel, however, maintains that it cannot consider such an idea until it enjoys real peace with all of its neighbours.^{xv} So the prospect of a region-wide nuclear weapons free zone coming into being any time soon is remote. As an interim step, a sub-regional zone, encompassing Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states could be a useful confidence-building measure.^{xvi}

Conclusion

In negotiations, there is always an attempt to search for a rational solution. But what seems rational to one side is not necessarily perceived so by the other. The different narratives, histories, and traumas challenge us to understand why the irrational component is a central piece of any resolution of conflict. Put another way, the deep emotions that shape the discourse have been built up over generations and are often so deeply lodged in the national narrative that they pose substantial obstacles to finding an agreement.

The formalities of official negotiations often do not address the irrational and there is a need to establish mechanisms, built into structures of negotiations, to deal with this. Without exploring the emotions that lie beneath the surface, fears and anxieties will continue to destroy the process. To be effective, negotiations will therefore need to involve not only realpolitik, but also incorporate the understanding and integration of human motivation and behaviour.

Because we see a regime as unfriendly, we assume the worst motives and intentions when that regime tries to develop a capability. If we saw it as friendly, we would not be worried about this course of action. Because capabilities alone do not constitute a threat; motives and intentions are equally important. Unfortunately, intelligence agencies are better at supplying information about the hard power and technicalities than about motives and intentions. This was manifest during the Cold War as much as it is manifest in the case of Iran today.

If the Shah of Iran and his family had remained in power, nuclear power plants would already be working in Iran. Politics allow our allies to do dangerous things whilst we chastise our non-allies for doing the same. The real challenge however is how to make our enemies our friends, something that is deeply counter-intuitive. This may require leaps of imagination that go beyond strategic calculations and rational thinking. Ultimately, without the capacity to develop empathy, all sides will lack the resources to make wise strategic calculations and therefore increase the likelihood of repeating the terrible violence of the 20th century.

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- ⁱⁱ Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon, *The Sixth Crisis – Iran, Israel, America, and the Rumors of War*, Oxford University Press, 2010: 144.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bruno Pellaud, “Testing Alternative Approaches”. In: Joachim Krause, Charles King Mallory IV (eds.): *The Strategic Implications of the Iranian Nuclear Program*, Aspen European Strategy Forum, 2010: 4.
- ^{iv} Allin and Simon, *The Sixth Crisis*, 2010: 25.
- ^v Supreme Leader’s Speech in Mashhad 21/03/09, The Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1076&Itemid=4 [21/04/11].
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- ^{vii} James R. Clapper, “Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence”, 10 February 2011, <http://intelligence.house.gov/sites/intelligence.house.gov/files/documents/DNISFR021011.pdf> [1-34] [11/04/11]: 5.
- ^{viii} Yossi Melman, “Outgoing Mossad chief: Iran won’t have nuclear capability before 2015”, *Haaretz* 07/01/11, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/outgoing-mossad-chief-iran-won-t-have-nuclear-capability-before-2015-1.335656> [21/04/11].
- ^{ix} Sir Richard Dalton, Unpublished recommendations to Chatham House, 21 March 2011:2.
- ^x *Ibid.*: 165.
- ^{xi} These include (1) the Algiers agreement on the US Embassy Hostages; (2) the 1984 cease fire on war of the cities (Iran-Iraq war); (3) the end of the Iran-Iraq war which involved US and Saudi Arabia; (4) the Lebanese hostage crisis in the 1990s; (5) the 1991 war against Iraq and the liberation of Kuwait, which entailed some understandings which reached between the coalition and Iran; (6) the case of the 13 Iranian Jews from Shiraz (1998-2001); (7) the 2001 Dec Bonn agreement with the US on Afghanistan, which also included negotiations with Iran; (8) military "understandings" between the US and Iran at the opening of the 2003 war; (9) the 2006 agreement between the UK and Iran on the 13 British sailors. See Giandomenico Picco’s contributions to the Saltzman Forum: IRAN 07/04/11, Institute of War & Peace Studies, <http://www.siwwps.com/events/saltzman-forum.html> [21/04/11].
- ^{xii} “Iran’s atomic negotiator Larijani resigns”, *Reuters* 20/10/07, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/20/us-iran-nuclear-larijani-idUSL2022235420071020> [15/04/2011].
- ^{xiii} Shahram Chubin, “The politics of Iran’s nuclear program”, Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace Press 2010, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/iranprimer.usip.org/files/The%20Politics%20of%20Iran%20s%20Nuclear%20Program.pdf> [15/04/11]: 4.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xv} Allin and Simon, *The Sixth Crisis*, 2010: 109.
- ^{xvi} Experience in Latin America and other regions in which such zones exist (Africa, Central Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific) suggests non-proliferation commitments made to neighbours can have greater political weight and value than those made to the global community. In the Middle East case, Saudi rivalry with and suspicion of Iran would make the creation of a sub-regional zone a real challenge, but Saudi Arabia has advocated something along these lines in the past.

Gabrielle Rifkind is Director, Human Security in the Middle East Programme. She is a group analyst and specialist in conflict resolution and is convener and founder of the Middle East Policy Initiative Forum (MEPIF). She has initiated and facilitated a number of Track II roundtables and hosts the media 'Liddite' Conversations with ORG. She is also working on developing dialogue between Iran, the US and Israel. She makes regular contributions to press and media and is author, with Scilla Elworthy, of Making Terrorism History (Random House, 2005).

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