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Diplomacy At Its Worst

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

In May 2003, Iran sent a secret proposal to the U.S. for settling our mutual disputes in a "grand bargain."

It is an astonishing document, for it tries to address a range of U.S. concerns about nuclear weapons, terrorism and Iraq. I've placed it and related documents (including multiple drafts of it) on my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground.

Hard-liners in the Bush administration killed discussions of a deal, and interviews with key players suggest that was an appalling mistake. There was a real hope for peace; now there is a real danger of war.

Scattered reports of the Iranian proposal have emerged previously, but if you read the full documentary record you'll see that what the hard-liners killed wasn't just one faxed Iranian proposal but an entire peace process. The record indicates that officials from the repressive, duplicitous government of Iran pursued peace more energetically and diplomatically than senior Bush administration officials -- which makes me ache for my country.

The process began with Afghanistan in 2001-2. Iran and the U.S., both opponents of the Taliban, cooperated closely in stabilizing Afghanistan and providing aid, and unofficial "track two" processes grew to explore opportunities for improved relations.

On the U.S. side, track two involved well-connected former U.S. ambassadors, including Thomas Pickering, Frank Wisner and Nicholas Platt. The Iranian ambassador to the U.N., Javad Zarif, was a central player, as was an Iranian-American professor at Rutgers, Hooshang Amirahmadi, who heads a friendship group called the American Iranian Council.

At a dinner the council sponsored for its board at Ambassador Zarif's home in September 2002, the group met Iran's foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi. According to the notes of Professor Amirahmadi, the foreign minister told the group, "Yes, we are ready to normalize relations," provided the U.S. made the first move.

This was shaping into a historic opportunity to heal U.S.-Iranian relations, and the track two participants discussed further steps, including joint U.S.-Iranian cooperation against Saddam Hussein. The State Department and National Security Council were fully briefed, and in 2003 Ambassador Zarif met with two U.S. officials, Ryan Crocker and Zalmay Khalilzad, in a series of meetings in Paris and Geneva.

Encouraged, Iran transmitted its "grand bargain" proposals to the U.S. One version was apparently a paraphrase by the Swiss ambassador in Tehran; that was published this year in *The Washington Post*.

But Iran also sent its own master text of the proposal to the State Department and, through an intermediary, to the White House. I've also posted that document, which Iran regards as the definitive one.

In the master document, Iran talks about ensuring "full transparency" and other measures to assure the U.S. that it will not develop nuclear weapons. Iran offers "active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization." Iran also contemplates an end to "any material support to Palestinian opposition groups" while pressuring Hamas "to stop violent actions against civilians within" Israel (though not the occupied territories). Iran would support the transition of Hezbollah to be a "mere political organization within Lebanon" and endorse the Saudi initiative calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Iran also demanded a lot, including "mutual respect," abolition of sanctions, access to peaceful nuclear technology and a U.S. statement that Iran did not belong in the "axis of evil." Many crucial issues, including verification of Iran's nuclear program, needed to be hammered out. It's not clear to me that a grand bargain was reachable, but it was definitely worth pursuing -- and still is today.

Instead, Bush administration hard-liners aborted the process. Another round of talks had been scheduled for Geneva, and Ambassador Zarif showed up -- but not the U.S. side. That undermined Iranian moderates.

A U.S.-Iranian rapprochement could have saved lives in Iraq, isolated Palestinian terrorists and encouraged civil society groups in Iran. But instead the U.S. hard-liners chose to hammer plowshares into swords.

I've chosen the two winners of my second annual "win-a-trip contest." One is Leana Wen, a medical student at Washington University in St. Louis. The second is Will Okun, who teaches at Westside Alternative High School in Chicago and dabbles in photography and writing.

Leana, Will and I will travel together through Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Congo. Stay tuned.

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