

Institutionalizing the US-Iran Detente

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have built a personal trust that has enabled diplomacy to begin overcoming decades of distrust, but this promising U.S.-Iranian relationship remains fragile and could disappear once a new president takes office, warn Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis.

By Trita Parsi and Tyler Cullis

Doubting the power of diplomacy is like doubting climate change at this point. Despite the skepticism Barack Obama faced in the 2008 elections for his willingness to talk to adversaries – including accusations of naiveté from Democratic and Republican rivals alike, Obama’s diplomacy has now both prevented a disastrous war with Iran and an Iranian nuclear bomb and has secured the release of American prisoners held in Iran.

And much more can be achieved if America stays the course – the question is if it can when so much of this success has been built on specific *personal* relations that have been forged. Since this new budding relationship with Iran has not been institutionalized, what will be left of it when the Obama administration leaves office?

Having established a reliable channel of communication between the two countries for the first time in more than three decades, the Obama administration can explore opportunities that have been unavailable to previous administrations. For Obama – who has long argued that the U.S. should be able “to test the possibility that engagement leads to better outcomes” – sailing into such uncharted waters with Iran affords a ripe opportunity to shape a legacy that is growing by the day.

The challenge is to ensure that these channels of communication are not limited to the personal rapport that has developed between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, but will survive into succeeding administrations. Failing to formalize the channel could not only undermine the very real opportunities that spring forth from such direct U.S.-Iran engagement, but could also implicate the sustainability of the nuclear accord itself.

The most natural step – normalizing relations and reopening embassies – is not in the cards for now. But there are measures the U.S. and Iran can take that could help institutionalize this critical relationship.

Step 1: The U.S. and Iran need to establish a strategic dialogue through regular meetings between their respective government agencies.

This will not be a negotiation between the two, but rather a dialogue on various issues of common concern, though not necessarily of common interest.

The main purpose of this dialogue is to better understand each other's motives in order to preempt misperceptions and misunderstandings. And of course, if areas of common interest can be found, the dialogue provides an opportunity to explore collaboration on those issues.

In 2003, the Iranians offered a three-step negotiation road map for the U.S. and Iran. One of the suggested measures was a strategic dialogue just of this kind. The George W. Bush administration ignored the proposal.

Had the Bush administration accepted the invitation for dialogue, the Middle East would likely look very different today. The U.S. and Iran may have collaborated rather than competed with each other in Iraq – as they did in Afghanistan before President Bush included Iran in the Axis of Evil. If they had cooperated, that may have prevented the collapse of the Iraqi state and the spread of sectarianism. The world may never have known the scourge of the so-called Islamic State, and Syria might not have devolved into a civil war seemingly immune to resolution.

Missing that opportunity in 2003 proved tremendously costly for all sides. Missing it after 2016 may prove even costlier.

Step 2: The legislatures of both countries need to establish their own dialogue.

Some of the harshest opposition to improved U.S.-Iran relations is currently concentrated within the U.S. Congress and the Iranian parliament. The only prospect of undoing some of that mistrust is to begin a process of dialogue – just as the nuclear deal began with discreet talks between American and Iranian officials in Oman.

Ideally, this process will eventually lead to congressional delegations visiting Iran and vice versa and provide the legislatures a formal role in the strategic dialogue between the two countries.

Step 3: Perhaps most importantly, there needs to be increased contact and communications between the two societies.

Whether connections between American and Iranian think tanks or non-policy oriented people-to-people exchanges, such activities have been almost nonexistent in the past three decades.

Here, the problem has primarily been on the Iranian side, where the government has viewed such activities with great suspicion. Just in the past months, there

has been a crackdown inside Iran on individuals engaged in such bridge-building. For people-to-people contacts to flourish and enable the two societies to rediscover each other, the bridge builders must feel safe.

While the Obama administration has always spoken about diplomacy with Iran as limited and transactional, the events of the past few weeks show this dialogue has the potential to become transformational. But for that to happen, it cannot be limited to Obama and Rouhani or Kerry and Zarif.

True opportunities to start a dialogue between the U.S. and Iran have only appeared once a decade. Opportunities to change the paradigm of the relationship may only come once a generation.

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Jailing an Anti-Drone Protester

As the U.S. government fights its endless wars around the globe, some Americans are moving beyond despair and confusion to challenge the military machine, people like Mary Anne Grady Flores, who was sentenced to six months in jail for photographing an anti-drone protest, writes Bill Moyers.

By Bill Moyers

Mary Anne Grady Flores is in jail today and American citizens everywhere can surely breathe a sigh of relief that we are safe from her criminal behavior at least for the next six months.

That's the length of the sentence this 59-year-old peace activist in upstate New York began on Tuesday, one day after the United States honored Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for his commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience. If he were here today, the martyred Dr. King would surely be shaking his head that America still has a problem with peaceful dissenters of conscience.

And what exactly did Grady Flores do to warrant spending the next six months in jail? She photographed a peaceful protest outside Hancock Field Air National

Guard Base near Syracuse, New York. The base is where the U.S. trains pilots to launch drone strikes in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen.

It wasn't a crime for her to be taking pictures of the demonstration, but when she briefly and unintentionally, yes, unintentionally, stepped onto a road that belongs to the base, she violated what authorities called "an order of protection," which had been issued in 2012 to forbid protesters from approaching the home or workplace of Col. Earl Evans, a commander of the 174th Attack Wing of the Air National Guard. She had never met Evans, never threatened him, never showed any intention of harming him.

Nonetheless, a town justice, David Gideon, issued the order to "protect" the Colonel from the activists. That's right, the commander of a major military operation, piloting drones on lethal missions half-way around the world, requested a court order of protection against a group of mostly gray-haired demonstrators whom he had never met.

In stepping briefly on the roadway at the base, Grady Flores violated that order, despite the fact that, as she says, "We weren't at the security gate. We were out at the roadway."

Now get this: The order issued by Judge Gideon was of the sort commonly used against victims of sexual or domestic abuse. "The legal terms 'victim' and 'witness' have been expanded in this case in a way that's new and unique in the state of New York," said attorney Lance Salisbury at a press conference before Grady Flores was hauled off to jail.

Grady Flores had protested outside the base before. She belongs to The Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars, which has criticized the drone program since 2010, calling for a change in policy to uphold life and law.

President Obama and the Pentagon insist that using drones in pursuit of terrorists causes minimal civilian casualties and protects American troops, but Grady Flores takes issue with that justification. She told us she had been moved, in particular, by reports of the staggering numbers of civilians killed by U.S. drones, and she says her fears were confirmed by documents recently leaked to journalists at *The Intercept* revealing that during one five-month stretch, 90 percent of those killed in one part of Northeastern Afghanistan were not the intended target.

Grady Flores says she was also shaken by the 2013 testimony before Congress of a family from Pakistan that had suffered a drone strike in North Waziristan. A grandmother of three herself, Grady Flores listened as Rafiq ur Rehman recounted

his mother's death in the presence of her grandchildren.

"She was out in the fields picking okra with the kids around and a drone strike happened, and she was sent to four winds now the kids live in terror," Grady Flores recalls.

"That's why citizens are at the gates of Hancock," says Grady Flores. "That's why we're there."

Grady Flores was arrested in 2012, when she and 16 others blocked the entrance to the base, prompting the request from the military for the order of protection. When she was arrested again a year later, not for protesting herself but for stepping on the road outside the base and taking pictures of others who *were* protesting, she was found to be in violation of that protection order. And the protestors she was photographing? They were acquitted.

Justice David Gideon threw the book at her. He sentenced her to a year, claiming in his five-page ruling that he didn't buy her First Amendment argument. Instead, he thought she "was willing to 'break the law' to seek publicity for her cause." After an appeal, her sentence was shortened to six months.

Before she went to jail, she told us: "I asked my grandchildren, 'Do you know where I'm going?' and they said, 'yeah, you're going to jail, Nana.'"

She told us that it is difficult to leave her 88-year-old mother who is ailing, but that her mother appreciates her carrying on in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King and the iconic Catholic activist Dorothy Day, with whom her mother once worked. Day famously said, "No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do."

Grady Flores says her mother's good-bye shared that sentiment, "Mom said to me, 'I'll pray for you, I'll be with you in that cell.' She said it in a whisper, but she's grateful that I'm continuing the work."

Reporting by [Gail Ablow](#) and [John Light](#).

Bill Moyers is the managing editor of Moyers & Company and [BillMoyers.com](#), where this article first appeared.
