



Iran and the United States: David Speedie Interviews Gary Sick

Gary Sick , David C. Speedie

November 5, 2008



[Gary Sick](#)

DAVID SPEEDIE: Good afternoon. I'm David Speedie, Director of the [U.S. Global Engagement Program](#) here at the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs in New York.

Today we think of a region, and among the raft of challenges that the new president will face is that of the extended region from the Middle East to the Persian Gulf, and particularly, perhaps, the relationship—however that may be defined—with Iran moving forward.

To discuss this today, we're delighted to have an old friend, both personally and of the Council, Gary Sick. Gary Sick is Senior Research Scholar at the [School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University](#) and is perhaps our most astute regional watcher when it comes to this.

Gary, welcome to Carnegie Council.

GARY SICK: Thank you.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Perhaps your most significant contribution to this at this point is, to use a word we don't like around here, a unique one, and that is through the [Gulf/2000](#) network. You set this up, Gary and you are the steward, the director. Tell us a little bit about the history, the genesis, the development, and the reach of this organization that really monitors developments.

GARY SICK: I could talk for hours, because it's actually what fills my days completely. Basically, it's a project that was started in 1993 and was originally designed to bring together people in the Gulf who don't ever see each other. It was designed to find ways to get Saudis to talk to Omanis and Omanis to talk to Iranians and so forth. These people live close together, but they don't see each other that much. So this was an effort.

We hosted conferences. It was quite successful. We brought those people together, created the node of a group of people who stayed in touch for years and served as the beginning of a network that has grown very, very large. But they first met and really got to know each other by one of our conferences.

But after we had done about three conferences, we were sort of running out of subjects to look at. By that time, the Internet was actually becoming much more important. More and more people were getting email. So I suggested to people, "Why not join us online, and we could have a conversation there that would go beyond, say, an annual conference or something like that?"

It took a long time to get off the ground. Initially it was like 15 of my friends that were on this thing. It took maybe 15 minutes a week for me to do this.

DAVID SPEEDIE: But it has changed.

GARY SICK: It has grown. We now have almost 1,500 members worldwide. Absolutely every continent is represented, all experts in one form or another on the Persian Gulf, everything from academics to businessmen to journalists and a lot of government officials, in all the governments in the Middle East and the United States and Britain and Europe and so forth.

Now it actually has, I think, the distinction of being probably the fastest way for somebody in the States, for instance, to deliver a message to the Iranian foreign ministry. If you get it on Gulf/2000 and it's discussed, it will be in the foreign ministry the next day and be circulated very quickly thereafter.

So that's an aspect of the thing which I think is not often appreciated.

We also cull material from the Web about the Persian Gulf and keep it in our members-only site. It is a members-only organization. People can go on there. It's updated 365 days a year. Even though our membership is only 1,500 at this time, in one way or another, through journalism and other ways, we reach millions of people. So the outreach has turned out to be extraordinary. And instead of spending 15 minutes a week, it is now a full-time job for me. It's like editing a small newspaper.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Am I right in thinking that I heard you say at one point that there was actually, from official ministries in Tehran the request that messages somehow reach them first and be held?

GARY SICK: No.

DAVID SPEEDIE: I thought there was some—

GARY SICK: No, I've never had a request for special treatment. I did have a friend who was in Tehran recently, at one of the top think tanks related to the foreign ministry. He said in the discussions they were having around their table in Tehran people kept saying, "Oh, but I read that on Gulf/2000. Gulf/2000 says this is what it is," and so forth.

It's amazing. I have no way of judging in many cases how much outreach we have.

It actually is true that for much of the rest of the world, where information is often limited to your own little circle or your own set of newspapers, this breaks those barriers down. If you want to find out what is being said in Japan or Australia or certainly the United States or Europe at any given time, it's right there, and it's up to date.

DAVID SPEEDIE: As a subscriber, I can attest to the fact that if I leave the office for a few days and come back and I have 400 unread emails, 210 of them have the initials "GGS" as a preface. I'm not, by the way, in any way suggesting that's an overload.

GARY SICK: It's an interesting thing. One of the aspects of this is, first of all, this is all done with a very cooperative relationship with Columbia University. I think the Columbia people, who are actually designing a new Website for us, feel that they get some wonderful advertising out of this, because their name appears, columbia.edu, as the address.

I must say, I've gotten a kind of notoriety or fame or whatever it is. I'm certainly well-known in lots of places. Constantly, if I go to conferences or meetings, people come up to me and say, "Oh, hello, it's good to see you," and all of this, and I haven't a clue who these people are. Most of the people I have never met, but they know my name so well that they feel I must know them, too. So I have friends everywhere I go.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Let's jump, if we may, into the political fray a little bit here. It's inevitable. We are two days after a—to call it a historic election would probably be a grotesque understatement. Clearly the question of dialogue with Iran—and, by the way, I should say in passing that obviously, I would say, a majority, at least, of the postings on Gulf/2000 are on Iran at this point.

GARY SICK: True. I have people that complain about that. They would like it to cover more territory than it does. I have no control.

DAVID SPEEDIE: But clearly Iran is the predominant theme of the network. It also figured largely in the presidential campaign. The question of a dialogue with Iran was raised by now President-elect [Obama](http://www.whitehouse.gov). It became a point of disputation in the debates.

What were your first thoughts when the Obama victory was official?

GARY SICK: I have watched over the last few years as first the [Clinton](http://www.whitehouse.gov) Administration, but then particularly the [George W. Bush](http://www.whitehouse.gov) Administration, fought internally to have any kind of a coherent policy on Iran. I would argue that, with a few small exceptions, they failed. In fact, the United States has not had a coherent policy.

So from my perspective, with Obama clearly willing to entertain a different perspective, I don't think he's going to give away anything to Iran, but I do think he believes, as I do very strongly, that a policy of not talking to people who disagree with us is really shortsighted. Assuming that he starts from that perspective also, then the question becomes not, "Should we should talk to Iran?" but how you go about doing that. That's a much more

interesting question, actually.

The Bush Administration has been toying with the idea of talking to Iran, but they could never quite bring themselves to admit that that was what they wanted to do, and so they were sort of backing into it. Especially in this last two years, the Bush Administration has changed its policies rather dramatically. But you could never really engage them on the subject, because it all had to be done almost covertly within their own administration, because they had so many people who were opposed to any kind of contact with Iran that it was regarded as almost heretical to do it.

[Condoleezza Rice](#), for the last year or so, has been conducting a policy of gradually opening up to Iran and running into huge obstacles with the people who had been very much involved in making policy—the [John Bolton](#)s and others—who really objected vigorously to this policy.

That part of it will be over, I think. I think the next debate is going to be, "All right, we're going to talk to them. But what do we need, to arm ourselves, basically, in order to talk to Iran?" A lot of people, liberals and conservatives alike, believe that the United States is operating from a position of weakness and that we have to beef up our leverage if we are going to be effective in talks with Iran.

Frankly, I think we have a lot of leverage. We've just never used it. We've never tried to use the leverage that we've got.

But what this does, unfortunately, is that, as people say, "Oh, we have to arm ourselves for these talks and make the Iranians take us seriously," what they really mean is much more stringent: Either sanctions against Iran—say a blockade or something like that—to get their attention, with the threat of military action, and then, if Iran doesn't respond the way we want them to do, to up the pressure even more. It really is a recipe for going to war with Iran. It's a covert strategy, because the people who are proposing it say, "Oh, we want to have negotiations," but they want to have negotiations under our terms explicitly.

And then to say, "See? We tried."

GARY SICK: That's right. They don't really believe that you can get anyplace with Iran. For some reason, they seem to have a tremendous inferiority complex—that the Iranians are smarter than we are, they are more clever, and we'll never be able to carry this off. I simply disagree. I think we have a lot of leverage, and I think we are pretty clever ourselves, if we want to be.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Elaborate on the leverage that you see.

GARY SICK: The most obvious one—and there is a series—first of all, we have Iran surrounded. We have troops in Afghanistan. We have troops in Iraq. We have our whole 5th Fleet operating off their shores in the Persian Gulf. So just from a military point of view—and they know that we went in and defeated [Saddam Hussein](#) in a matter of weeks, and they had fought eight years with this guy to no effect. So they have no illusions about the fact that we're bigger and stronger than they are. We don't have to prove that; they know it.

But more than that, ever since 1995, we have been constructing a regime of sanctions placed on Iran, initially unilateral—just the United States putting sanctions on Iran—and more recently, multilateral, through the [United Nations](#). The policy hasn't worked in terms of trying to get Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment program. But in the meantime, we have accumulated a lot of trading cards. Basically, Iran won't capitulate to us because of sanctions. They won't say, "Okay, we're going to change and do everything differently because you've got us under your thumb." They won't do that. But they do care about the sanctions. They find them annoying and actually very harmful to their economy. And right now their economy is hurting.

So an offer to lift sanctions in return for specific things that Iran could do for us would be an interesting effort—basically, make it worth their while. What we have been doing up until now is saying, "You stop your enrichment. Roll it back and go back to where you were before. Then we'll talk to you." That's not much of an offer, especially if, at the same time, you are saying, "We really want to overthrow your regime." So it is not a very persuasive argument.

But if you used the sanctions as a bargaining chip, we have a stack of bargaining chips that Iran really cares about.

DAVID SPEEDIE: In that regard, [Ahmadinejad](#) spoke of the so-called deal that we were prepared to make suspend enrichment, then we'll talk. I think that's what he was talking about when he talked about being offered "walnuts for gold." Then [Larijani](#), who is not exactly his close ally, used "bonbons for pearls." Clearly, it would seem that "negotiations with preconditions" in this case is kind of a contradiction in terms.

Our mutual friend [George Perkovich](#) wrote recently in this regard that the cost of defiance and the benefits of cooperation need to be significantly greater.

How do you tease that one out?

GARY SICK: I should mention that George Perkovich was the original supporter and actually came up with the initial concept of Gulf/2000 many years ago, when he was at the [W. Alton Jones Foundation](#). So I have a long relationship, going back, with George.

But in this case George and I really do disagree on the nuclear side. I think he's coming at it the way a lot of other people are, and that is, negotiations from a position of strength—so negotiate, but have that iron fist hanging over their heads.

I'm not opposed to that. It's just that I think that if we stress the iron fist, Iran is not going to be likely to cooperate with us and, in fact, we'll lose what momentum we have. Our ability to ratchet up the pressure—we've tried it and we've tried it and we've tried it. If you look at it, in 1995, we started imposing sanctions on Iran. At that time, they had no nuclear program at all. Here we are, almost 15 years later, with more and more and more sanctions having been done, and Iran has 4,000 centrifuges spinning and are basically well on their way to having a full nuclear fuel cycle.

So unless there's something I'm missing here, the policy has not worked. We have never looked on the sanctions as anything but pressure. We have never looked on them as a means of actually dealing with Iran.

Iran also wants to be recognized as a player. They are a player in the Gulf. They are a major player, and we can't, in fact, have a coherent policy in the Persian Gulf without dealing with Iran in some form. Iran wants to be acknowledged as part of the game. I think that's a price that we're going to have to pay.

DAVID SPEEDIE: In fact, is it not fair to say that Iran was helpful in the beginning, post 9/11, working with the [Northern Alliance](#)?

GARY SICK: For instance, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Iran had a serious debate about whether they should oppose—they are opposed to the United States having a greater presence in the Gulf area. They had a debate: "Should we oppose this?" The bottom line, after a good deal of discussion, was, "No, we're not going to." They didn't say a word, and they didn't try to make our lives more difficult. In a few small ways, they tried to make it easier. We were taking out their worst enemy, so it was not hard to understand.

That's true also in Afghanistan. When we went in—they are not friends with the [Taliban](#). They had nearly come to blows themselves with the Taliban. When we were prepared to go in, they were prepared to offer us all their assets, which were quite significant, because they had good relations with the Northern Alliance and these warlords who were operating in the region. So they went to work with us. They operated hand-in-glove and, in fact, were very deeply involved in the Bonn talks which negotiated the [Karzai](#) government. Without Iran's assistance, it's not clear that the invasion of Afghanistan would have gone nearly as well. They also put a lot of money into reconstruction.

At the end of that process, after the invasion, when they were actually being acknowledged as being particularly helpful to us, it was only about six weeks after that was over that President Bush, out of the blue, stood up in his [State of the Union address](#) and said they are part of an axis of evil. All of the good work that had been done was just swept away.

Iran came to us again in 2003 and proposed what some people would call a grand bargain. It was a negotiating agenda—no deal, but an agenda of things that they were prepared to talk about. It was quite far-reaching and by far the best they have ever offered to us. It looks awfully good in retrospect. Because we were busy pulling down statues in Baghdad we just threw it in the wastebasket. Basically, it was ignored.

DAVID SPEEDIE: One of our central premises here at the Council, in this program of U.S. global engagement, is that we look at complex relationships far too monodimensionally. That covers Russia, it covers Iran, it covers Pakistan, and other areas that we are focused on. This is, of course, the nuclear question. It raises the issue—you mentioned the last two administrations. There have been five presidents, basically, since the Iranian Revolution. They've all pretty much failed on Iran.

Beyond that, in my previous life I was involved in a program with U.S. policymakers with Russia. We tried to broaden the perspective and not just have United States–Russia relations, but United States–Russia possible cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation, on terrorism, and at one point, proposed United States and Russia on Iran.

I'll never forget an unnamed liberal Democrat congressman saying to me, "Iran is toxic. I cannot go back to my constituency and say that we've been discussing Iran."

What on earth has got us to this point?

GARY SICK: I was in the White House at the time of the [Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis](#), which is where I cut my eyeteeth on this whole subject, and I guess why I'm still doing it. I can't get away. But not only can't I get away, but the American public can't get away from that image of Iran that was created at the time when they took our hostages and they were holding them.

Two things. It was the first major encounter between the United States and fundamentalist Islam. That's the first time we ever really came into contact with it, and it was a shock.

The second thing was, it was really the first major foreign policy crisis that was fully televised from beginning to end. For the very first time, Americans sitting at the dinner table in the evening had piped into their living rooms this group of fanatic, bearded crazies waving their fists and shouting, "Death to America!" night after night. That does make an impression. And that image of Iran as a crazy, fanatic place where you can't even talk to these people—that has survived.

Iran has made a few attempts to try to change that. President [Khatami](#), when he was elected in 1997, really made an effort to change the face of Iran, and actually succeeded to a considerable degree, to the point where the Clinton Administration was willing to make a major initiative to try to open up to Iran. It's one of the points where the United States really did make an effort. The Iranians let it pass, partly because they were worried about the internal politics of the situation. The Supreme Leader didn't want Khatami, this friendly, smiling guy who is a reformer—really, I think the [Supreme Leader](#) saw him as a challenge to the leadership of the mullahs, who wanted to dominate the whole situation—he would have gotten the credit for opening up to the Americans, which is actually a very popular idea in Iran.

DAVID SPEEDIE: On the street.

GARY SICK: They had one of the rare polls that was taken a few years ago—quite a few years ago now—and they found that 77 percent of the Iranian people said, yes, having good relations with the United States would be a good thing.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Significantly higher than most European capitals.

GARY SICK: By far—

DAVID SPEEDIE: At least until last Tuesday.

GARY SICK: Curiously enough, the fellow who carried out the poll was sent to jail. That tells you something about the regime. Basically, the hard-line mullah/clerical regime really wants to control the way this works. They do not welcome anybody getting in because they see this as fundamental to—in a way, we are mirror images of each other. The reason that your congressional person was unwilling to consider talking to Iran, or to let anybody know that he was willing to do that, was because of domestic politics. It was because he was afraid of the backlash in his own district.

Exactly the same thing happens in Iran. They have made America the target of the revolution from day one. So when you talk about the United States, opening up to the "Great Satan"—and this has been part of their rituals for 30 years—that also has domestic consequences.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So it's a political zero-sum game on both sides.

GARY SICK: That's exactly right.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Nevertheless, just to return for the moment to the sense of the importance of Iran in the presidential debate, there has been obviously a lot of chatter—if that's the word—on G2K on the issue of engagement with Iran.

[K. Ramazani](#) from Charlottesville listed the common interests of the United States and Iran—stability in Afghanistan and Iraq, the security of uninterrupted flow of oil, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, and so on. [Karim Sadjadpour](#) of [CEIP](#) [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace] went more into the tone and style of the exchange. Former Under Secretary of State [Nick Burns](#) took a sort of "yes, but" approach to talking to Iran. Then this [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) report, which I'd like a word or two from you on, seemed to take a somewhat harder line. Finally, and closest, presumably, to the pulse of an Obama Administration, is [Dennis Ross](#), again a

somewhat cautious, pragmatic—but all in all, if not *the* foreign policy issue of the moment in the climax of the campaign, it was awfully close.

GARY SICK: Although I spend most of my time working on Iran and United States-Iran relations, in reality I think the importance of Iran in our foreign policy is greatly overstated. Iran is not a threat to us in any significant way—even less than Iraq was, actually. So it's more of an ideological question than it is a survival question.

Israel certainly has made a major issue of it. But even from their point of view—though I understand why they would take that position—a lot of serious Israelis, if you talk to them in private, say, "We're not really threatened," including [Tzipi Livni](#), the person who might become the next prime minister. She has privately said, "Look, the Iranians are not an existential threat to Israel. They are a problem and they are a danger and we need to take them seriously, but it is not the end of the world."

The problem is, because Iran is who Iran is, and because they have this president who is prone to make outrageous statements of all kinds—

DAVID SPEEDIE: Imagine having a president like that.

GARY SICK: They have actually exacerbated their own bad image while he has been president. I think that's going to work against him when this next electoral cycle comes around. He's up for reelection in the spring. I think he's going to have a very hard time of it.

Anyway, this has been a problem that had to be dealt with.

The studies that have been done are part of this continuing debate that goes on in Washington about how we address Iran and what we do with Iran. After that study came out, I was in touch with Dennis Ross, who is a fellow that I've known for many years. He is a well-known adviser to the Obama campaign on foreign policy, especially Middle East issues. He traveled with Obama when he went to Israel and the Middle East. He has a lot of credibility in the Jewish community. He represents the [Washington Institute](#), which is one of the major think tanks in Washington.

So all the way around, he's somebody to be taken very seriously.

I got in touch with him. I said, "Look, you've been part of two major studies," one at the Center for a New American Strategy—he produced a paper for them about dealing with Iran and then with this BPC [Bipartisan Policy Center], which came out with this study. In the first case, he was talking about negotiations with pressure, but he wasn't bloodthirsty about what he meant by pressure. You had to keep the pressure on, but he really wasn't proposing going to war. In the BPC study, although they don't say it in those words, in fact they are saying, "We need to risk going to war in order to get Iran's attention."

It really was a blueprint for how you go to war, while always proclaiming that you don't want to go to war, but finding yourself drawn in anyway. They were quite prepared to do that.

He signed both of those reports. He also has signed onto another lobbying site, which is called [United Against Nuclear Iran](#). It has some of the most intense right-wing folks in the country, who really fall on one side of the spectrum. There is no real balance there. In that sense, Dennis is, I think, seen as a balancer, but he's not a balancer, because he is, in fact, willing to go along with all of this rhetoric.

I told him that I just think he's playing both sides of the game. I really wanted to know what he thought. It was a private conversation. I don't want to put words in his mouth. But I was really concerned about this. He gave me reassurances about what he was interested in, but I didn't find them entirely reassuring.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So let's hold off on celebrating a new dawn on United States-Iranian relations. Is that what you're saying?

GARY SICK: Yes. The debate will go on. The terms of the debate have shifted. It used to be, "Talk to Iran or bomb them." Those were the two extremes.

Today nobody much is talking about bombing them, but a lot of people are talking about being willing to risk military action to back up our negotiating strategy. It's all done in the name of negotiations. But negotiations that basically push you to the brink of war, I think, are—that's where the debate is today, and that's what's going on.

There is, by the way, a new study. There is a whole flock of these. Everybody wants to get the ear of the next president. The next one is from a group called the [American Foreign Policy Project](#). They will be coming out with

theirs in the next week or two, so by the time anybody sees this video, that will be out on the street. It's a very different position. I'm associated with it, so I'm giving it a plug.

But I do think that what it did that none of the others did is, it actually reached out and pulled in 30 or 40 of the top people in the country who work on Iran, who really know the country extremely well, who have studied it—the history, the language, the culture, and the policy—and brought them all together and hammered out a position that they can all agree with. It's a very different position than the one that is basically produced by—for instance, the Bipartisan Policy Center had four Air Force generals on the committee. There was nobody else who looks at the military side except those guys, and Air Force generals have a solution to most problems, and it is—

DAVID SPEEDIE: From 36,000 feet.

GARY SICK: That's right. We have this huge weapon; let's use it.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Again, this report is from the American—say the organization again.

GARY SICK: It's the American Foreign Policy Project. You'll see it when it comes out. You have never heard of it because they haven't done anything up until now.

DAVID SPEEDIE: That's very encouraging.

I did want to get back to a specific follow-up question on Israel.

But the other part that I think that perhaps—again, courtesy of your site, G2Kmembers have a better insight on is thinking inside Iran itself. For example—this is often, I think, reading the tea leaves—it seems fairly explicit from for example, on the recent financial crisis, there seemed to be sort of a national *schadenfreude* towards the West and its problem from a hard-line clerical point of view, punishment from God. I think the quote was, "The unhappier they are, the happier we become."

Then [Rafsanjani](#), more recently: "We should not think that the financial crisis that hit the world is in our interest."

That seems to me to have some significance.

GARY SICK: It has a lot of significance. But the change in tone from Iran, which has a lot of other ripples that have been created from that, is not so much because they have changed their ideological stripes, but because it has really bitten them now. The price of oil has been cut in half. That has had a devastating impact on the economic situation. That's the other nail in [Ahmadinejad](#)'s coffin. They have this oil reserve fund, which was accumulating the excess dollars that they were getting because of selling their oil and putting into a reserve fund. He has been using that as sort of his private slush fund to basically convince people that his economic policies are working and are doing a good thing. He has been handing out money to everybody—soft loans, incredible things. It has fueled inflation. It has not created many jobs. The reserve fund is now fairly low, and Iran sees the oil price dropping and this cornucopia of cash that was just flooding in on top of them isn't there anymore.

He is going to be held responsible, correctly, for that. Recently, Ahmadinejad was reported to be suffering from exhaustion. I have met this guy three times and spent a considerable amount of time with him, actually, in one form or another. He is not a man that you would suspect is subject to exhaustion. This guy just goes and goes and goes and goes. He apparently never sleeps. This has been true for the better part of three or four years. All of a sudden he is suffering from exhaustion.

His swooning fit came just at the point when the oil prices swooned also. I think he was looking around and saying, "You know, my whole policy is bankrupt, and all of a sudden I'm facing really, really difficult times." I think it hit him that if the price of oil stays down, his chances of getting reelected are very, very slim, because his whole strategy was based on giving money to people and getting them to support him.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Look a little more into the crystal ball. If in the spring of 2009 Ahmadinejad—what are the options?

GARY SICK: It's going to be complicated. Iranian politics is really mysterious—almost as mysterious as American politics, actually. Ahmadinejad was elected primarily because people really saw him as a noncorrupt guy who would fix the economy and would get the trains running on time. They saw him as somebody who would take care of domestic policy for them, and they voted for him on those grounds. There were other games being played at the same time, but that's why people voted for him.

He hasn't done that at all. He hasn't fulfilled any of the promises that he gave to the people. Instead, he has been off talking about "There was no Holocaust," "Israel should be wiped from the pages of time," and making appearances at the United Nations, traveling abroad, and strutting about, actually, on foreign policy issues, looking for trouble.

I think that with the election of Obama here, that whole looking-for-trouble mode is not going to be very popular. The Iranians are going to want somebody who would actually be able to deal with the Americans in a sensible way. The whole business about the foreign policy versus domestic policy is not going to sell.

The people say, "Wait a minute. What are you doing for us? Why are we spending all of our time and money on battles abroad and paying no attention to what's going on in this country?" Finally, "What have you done for us in terms of the economy?"

The answer to all of this is very bad from Ahmadinejad's point of view. So let's assume that he's in trouble. It's never over until it's over, and I'm not making any predictions, but he's in trouble.

What happens? What is the alternative? There are people in Iran right now that are talking about President Khatami running again. In Iran, you can only run two consecutive terms, but if you lay out you can come back and run again. I personally think that's not a good idea, and I hope that he will find somebody else.

I would like to see Khatami, who is the most respected reformist in Iran, with a huge positive reputation abroad, throw his significant support behind someone else who actually could run the government and would be a real leader. Khatami is a philosopher. He's a wonderful man. His ideas would be attractive to Americans as much as they would be to Iranians.

But he is not a political fighter. When it came to a struggle with the Supreme Leader or the [Revolutionary Guards](#) or whoever it was, he tended to back down and wait to fight another day. He gave up so many different battles that in the end he didn't accomplish what he set out to do, and people were very disappointed.

I don't want to see that repeated. But I do think he could use his credibility and his popularity to support a candidate who actually would be the kind of serious reformer that is needed and who would be prepared to take some risks to make that happen. I'm hoping that that's what he will do.

There is a flock of potential candidates. The only one who has declared so far is Mr. [Karroubi](#), who is an old-line leftist who has turned into a reformer and is a perfectly good candidate. He has good revolutionary credentials, but also knows something about economics and finance and the world.

There are others like [Mohsen Rezaee](#), who is the former head of the Revolutionary Guards, who is also a born-again reformist. He would bring a tougher position into the office.

But there are people around. Plus there will be some of the old-line conservatives who may run. They don't like Ahmadinejad particularly. So the big problem is going to be dividing all of those up, because there will be, probably, a flock of candidates.

It's like our primaries. The problem is, Iran doesn't have any primaries. So you have all these people who decide they want to run, and the only way to sort them out is with the [Council of Guardians](#). They have to vet all of these people and say yes or no. It's a terrible way, because they have a political agenda of their own, and you don't trust what they have to say. That's the huge, huge weakness of their electoral system.

Once the candidates are chosen and they are running, the actual elections are fairly fair. People do vote, they vote in large numbers, and their votes are apparently counted. There is some hanky-panky here and there, but the actual functions of the election are pretty good. It's the fact that you can't get a huge difference of views.

But I do think, just as in the last election, there will be a difference; there will be a choice.

DAVID SPEEDIE: We're coming to the end, but it's difficult to have a conversation like this without mentioning Israel again. One of the things we like to also do around here in our global engagement initiative is to think of [Hans Morgenthau](#) and his principles of diplomacy, one of which was to avoid the crusading spirit in diplomacy, which would be a point well-taken, I think, after the last eight years. The other is to see things from the other point of view.

As we talk about the notion of Iran as an existential threat to Israel—you spoke about that a little a few minutes ago—surely it behooves us to look at things from Tehran's point of view, too, and the neighborhood it lives in—two declared nuclear powers. Israel itself, of course, for all intents and purposes, a nuclear power. There are several others exploring the nuclear option. It is, of course, a non-Arab Muslim country.

Clearly, if we want to put on the Tehran that for a moment, there is another way of looking at this.

GARY SICK: I think the proper way to look at the Middle East today is that it is a bipolar system. You have Israel in the west and Iran in the east, as centers of power. They are the two most influential countries in the whole Middle East. When you stop and think about it, this is fairly strange. They are non-Arab. They don't speak Arabic. Their religion—you have Jews and you have [Shia](#), which are exceptions to the rule. There are all of these things. This has come as quite a shock to the old-line [Sunni](#) states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Syria and others, who are accustomed to calling all the shots in the Middle East. They are the ones who make policy. It turns out that they are slowly being marginalized by these two.

I really believe that the right way to look at Iran and Israel is not as one being an existential threat to the other, but as two political rivals who are really trying to influence the direction of policy in the region and are maneuvering with each other along the way. That, I think, in a nutshell, encapsulates the way that Iran looks at this.

They want to increase their influence. I think it's wrong to say that Iran wants to be the hegemon of the region or to take it over physically. They are really not equipped to do that at all, and their history doesn't show that at all. That's not the way they have been behaving, even since the revolution. But they do want to have a full seat at the table.

It seems to me, to go back to our earlier conversation about all the things the United States can use to get Iran to agree to things that we want them to do, one of them is, "If you are going to have a full seat at the table and we can see to it that you can do that you're going to have to behave yourself a little better than you have been in the past, on a variety of different issues," whether that's nuclear or terrorism or attitude toward the peace process or what have you.

I think Iran wants to be recognized. It wants to be acknowledged as a major power in the region. I think it has to be told at some point that the only way it's going to achieve that is by playing the game according to standard diplomatic rules, that it's not going to be able to just be a rogue element that goes out and breaks crockery on all sides and then expect everybody to—Iran recently ran for a seat on the Security Council. Each year they have a vote, and people come in from different regions. There were 190 countries voting. Iran got 32 votes.

I think that's a pretty clear signal to Iran and to the rest of the world that these kinds of policies—if Khatami had been the president of Iran, they would have gotten a lot more votes than that. But Ahmadinejad has offended and alienated so many people that I think he has really undercut Iran's policies. He has undercut their national interest. I think people are beginning to realize that more and more, which means that he has a bigger and bigger problem.

So one of my pieces of advice for Obama—he doesn't need my advice, but I offer it anyway—is that he should not rush into anything with Iran until after that election. I really think he should let nature run its course in Iran, not try to interfere in the election, make it clear that the United States is preparing itself to have a relationship with Iran, but just tacitly waiting until the election is over to see which way things are going to go.

By the time we get to June next year—that would be four months; it takes that time to put together a major policy project to think about how you are going to start this initiative. In the meantime, I think we will start to see signals about slow withdrawal from—other signals will be in the air. I think we will be in a position, then, when a new government takes place—and if Ahmadinejad stays, okay, we can deal with him. It's not my preferred option, but I think it's one that we can deal with if we have to.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Again, the point is that Ahmadinejad's harm to Iran in the international community that you have just described has been reflected by self-inflicted damage within Iran.

GARY SICK: Very much so. The same thing is true with the sanctions. The sanctions have not been nearly as effective as Iran has been in having very stringent negotiations with all the oil companies. If they were thinking about breaking the sanctions, Iran would give them a reason not to, because they wouldn't let them make a profit, they would string the negotiations out forever and ever, and they shot themselves in the foot over and over and over again.

Basically, Iran needs a government that actually functions.

DAVID SPEEDIE: On that reasonable thought, thank you very much, Gary

We have been talking with Gary Sick of Columbia University, Gulf/2000. Now I have to go up and read all my postings that I've missed in the last hour or so.

Thank you, Gary, very much.

GARY SICK: It's a real pleasure. I enjoyed it.

Copyright © 2012 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs