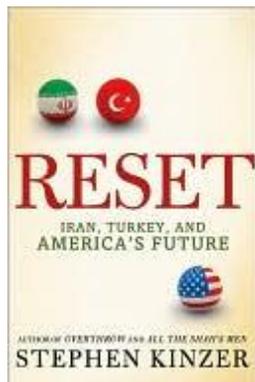


Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I am Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to thank you all for joining us.

We all know that the Middle East is never a quiet region, but in the past couple of weeks it seems that the headlines which have been attracting the most international attention are the ones involving Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Accordingly, at this moment in time we couldn't be more pleased than to be hosting the award-winning journalist Stephen Kinzer. Mr. Kinzer will be discussing his just-released and very timely book, [Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future](#).

It's a little more than a year since President [Obama](#) delivered his "[New Beginning](#)" speech in Cairo. Although expectations were high, few believe that the United States has actually hit the reset button in the Middle East. Now, with Middle Eastern politics grown more inflammatory day by day, the need for America to find a new security architecture that will eliminate unrest in the region has never been more apparent.

Not only is the [Iranian nuclear crisis](#) one of immediate concern, especially since [Turkey and Brazil defied Washington](#) to negotiate a deal with Iran on its nuclear program, but the recent [debacle involving a Turkish flotilla](#) whose aim was to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza has added a new dimension to regional dynamics, providing yet another example of the devastating consequences of the absence of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In *Reset*, Mr. Kinzer combines his vast knowledge of both the past and the present to provide a penetrating and timely critique of America's approach to the world's most volatile region, while also offering a new and surprising vision for rebuilding America's strategic partnership in the Middle East.

Mr. Kinzer writes that "contradictory U.S. policies in the Middle East are producing serial disasters." He recounts the historical events that first brought us to these straits and argues for the acknowledgement of a new reality that accepts Iran and Turkey as regional superpowers.

He describes how these two countries are challenging the old, dysfunctional bargains struck in the 20th century. He talks about how Turkey and Iran are America's logical partners and the nations we should engage with to form a new power triangle for the 21st century. And if this means reshaping our relationship with our traditional Middle Eastern allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, so be it.

But why Turkey and why Iran? He tells us that Turkey has had a long democratic tradition and played a role as a political and military ally of the United States during the Cold War, suggesting that these are the very reasons why this country could now help us navigate through the Middle East.

Although it is hard to see Iran as a potential ally, especially under its present leadership, the Iranian people have had a history of being pro-American and pro-democratic, which can still be seen today. Furthermore, notwithstanding the present attitude of its leaders, none of the chief goals of our country can be achieved without Iran's cooperation.

In the end, Mr. Kinzer tells us that if the United States would only break out of what he calls the "prison of old

policies, assumptions, and alliances," crises from Palestine to Iraq to Afghanistan could be toned down, if not resolved.

By most standards, Mr. Kinzer's approach is iconoclastic, and many of you may find his suggestions provocative, and even unsettling. But as President Obama [said](#) just yesterday, the current situation in the Middle East is unsustainable. Therefore, in the interest of finding a new approach for the future, it behooves us to be receptive to new ideas and new avenues so that the most seemingly unsolvable issues can be resolved.

With this in mind, please join me in welcoming someone who is willing to think outside the box, our imaginative guest Stephen Kinzer.

Remarks

STEPHEN KINZER: Provocative and unsettling. I like that. We need that.

It's wonderful to be here this morning.

I knew this book was going to be timely—I think we both did—but we would never have guessed that it could have been this timely. We've been hearing a lot about Iran over the last couple of years, but there has probably been more [news about Turkey](#) in the last three weeks than in the last three decades. And Turkey really does represent something that is going on in the broader world, which is the [rise of these middle powers](#).

As you heard in the introduction, I'm focusing my book on Turkey and Iran. Before publication, just in the last few weeks, I had the idea that I wanted to make a trip back to Turkey and back to Iran so I'd be right up-to-date on what was happening there. Unfortunately, Iran doesn't give visas to journalists anymore, and most of the foreign correspondents who live there have been chased out.

While I was pondering how to respond to this dilemma, I got a note from a travel agency in California. They said: "We're sponsoring a trip to Iran, a tourist trip, and we'd like you to be the tour guide."

I thought: "This is perfect; this fits right in. I'm a journalist but I'll go in on a tourist visa. Perfect. I've outsmarted them."

We got to the airport. There were about eight other Americans on the plane. They always have the tradition in Tehran of asking the Americans to wait until the end, and then they go through each passport individually.

After about half an hour, this young guy in a uniform came out and apologized for the delay. He said, "I'm sorry, but there's a problem with one passport."

I was flashing on Jonah—you know, there's one sinner on the boat; he's got to jump off. I knew it was me.

Sure enough, in another ten minutes the guy comes back and he says, "My boss is ready for you now."

So I go in. The boss has my passport and a computer screen. He looks up and says, "You are a journalist, but you are trying to get into our country as a tourist. Why?"

I tried to explain this was a big misunderstanding. But he wasn't buying it. He was on to me immediately. They wouldn't let me in. They threw me out of the country. I had to get back on the plane and fly back to Frankfurt.

I wanted to say, "I've been thrown out of better countries than this." But that wouldn't be true. I've been thrown out of other countries, but never countries that are as interesting as Iran.

It's a long story, but what finally happened is that as a result of some frantic phone calls, finally I was told to try again. And I did get in.

Then I had the chance to spend two weeks traveling all over Iran, which was fascinating. I didn't get to meet any government officials or opposition leaders, but I got tired of doing that many years ago. I had plenty of experience with that as a daily journalist. Your experience is you just spend a long time waiting outside a closed door until somebody comes out to lie to you. I wasn't into that kind of journalism anymore.

So as I traveled around Iran, the main question I wanted to ask people is: "What happened? Last year we were reading about all these [demonstrations and protests after the election](#), but suddenly it seemed to end. Where are we now?"

Everybody that I talked to—and I talked to dozens of people—told me more or less the same thing. They said: "Well, we tried something. It didn't work. Now it's over. If we go out and try it again, they're just going to beat us and put us in jail again. We don't want that. So we're going back to our lives. There will be change here, but it's just not going to come very soon."

In a country with 25 centuries of history, I guess that's probably a very reasonable attitude. This is a very different attitude from the attitude we have in America. Here we're very positivist; we want everything to happen quickly, and we believe that every problem has a solution if you just break it down. Iranians are not like this.

Iranians will tell you there are many problems that don't have any quick solution; in fact, there are many problems that have no solution at all. This is why we sometimes need an emotional or a psychological interpreter, as well as political one, when we try to deal with Iran.

Americans are totally results-oriented, for example. We are always willing to sacrifice principle to get a result. Iranians are exactly the opposite. They are always happy to sacrifice results in order to maintain a principle. These are things that we've got to keep in mind as we figure out how to approach Iran.

I can just reinforce what many of you have heard from other sources, that the popular sentiment in Iran is ecstatically pro-American. As soon as I started talking to people on the street and made it clear I was American, crowds would gather, and people would find someone that speaks English to translate. Everybody has something to say.

"We know they say very bad things about us over there, but we love Americans so much." That's what I had one girl say to me.

The repression with which those post-election protests were suppressed was quite shocking to the outside world, including to me. There is however, an even bigger story than the ferocity of the repression, and that is the uprising itself; the fact that you would have millions of people in a Muslim country in the Middle East pouring out onto the streets to protest a falsification of an election.

There are very seldom post-election protests in, let's say, Egypt because everybody expects the election to be stolen. And there are no post-election protests in, say, Saudi Arabia because there is no national election ever in Saudi Arabia.

So the protests themselves illustrate to me the tremendous vibrancy of the democratic society inside Iran. There is a huge disconnect between the approach to life of the people in power and the effervescent democratic culture that exists below that.

We often describe Turkey as the most democratic country in the Muslim world and the most democratic Muslim country in the Middle East, which is all true. But under the right circumstances Iran could actually vault over Turkey and become even more democratic than Turkey is. Iran doesn't have some of the drags on democracy that Turkey has, with its [military background](#) and some of the [ultra-nationalism](#) we see in Turkey.

Iran has a very intriguing future. It was very clear to me from my trip there last month that the unfolding of the Iranian political story is not over yet. There are still more chapters to go.

There are essentially three different alternatives for government in Iran: secular democracy, military rule, and religious rule.

So we got rid of secular democracy with the overthrow of [Mosaddegh](#) in 1953. Then we had 25 years of [royal dictatorship](#), and then 30 years of [religious rule](#). So if the cycle is working, we could be ready for a reemergence of democracy in Iran.

One of the things I do in my book is I spend the first half of the book telling what are some wonderful stories about the development of democracy in Iran and in Turkey over the last 100 years. This is a pretty unknown story in the United States, and many of the figures that I bring up as historically important are people whom most of you will have never heard of.

It is this development that separates Turkey and Iran from the other countries in the Muslim Middle East. It is that these are countries that have a century of working toward democracy. Democracy is not an idea that was brought to them by a foreign army at the point of a gun last week. It's something that they themselves decided 100 years ago that they wanted.

Democracy really can take hold anywhere, but there are two requirements.

- First of all, it takes time, because democracy is not just an election; democracy is a whole approach to life's problems.
- Secondly, it has to be brought into a country by the desire of the people who live there.

If you use those criteria, Turkey and Iran are the only two countries that have made this 100-year process.

Of course, the progress towards democracy in Turkey and Iran has not been without setbacks, and we are in a big setback moment in Iran right now. Nonetheless, that should not obscure the fact that these countries have a democratic culture that is very similar to our own. Their societies have much more in common with our society than the societies of our so-called allies—like Saudi Arabia, for example, which has nothing in common with the United States.

What does this mean for America's approach to that part of the world?

I do believe that the Middle East crisis is not just one of those festering, frozen conflicts, like [Cyprus](#) or [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), which we would like to solve, but if it just stays frozen nobody's going to die, and it's unfortunate, but it can go on forever, more or less, unless you're from that part of the world. Excuse me if there's anyone out there who is.

The Middle East crisis is not like that. The Middle East crisis is really getting worse and worse. It is intensifying, looming threats to the West. It is fomenting anger that is metastasizing around the world.

And of course, at the same time, the centrifuges are spinning in Tehran and other cities in Iran. Since we adopted our policy by [rejecting Iran's offer to negotiate with us in 2003](#), the number of centrifuges in Iran has increased by about ten-fold. So the policy of not talking with them is definitely not working, if our goal is to try to get them to reduce their nuclear ambitions.

Now, as the United States looks at that part of the world, to me the most important thing is that we realize we have to break out of the old paradigm, the old rut, the old Cold War approach to that part of the world. We need some radical new thinking.

The Cold War has been over for 20 years. The strategic environment in the Middle East has changed dramatically, the challenges that we face coming out of that region are changed, and there are even new opportunities for us there. But our policy has not changed. There's probably no place in the world where our policy has remained more stagnant in the face of more dramatic change in the region than the Middle East.

[Einstein](#) famously defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. That's what we're doing in the Middle East.

We are caught in such a very narrow spectrum of options that any original thinking is viewed with horror, as some kind of a bacteria that could be the beginning of some terrible disease that must be stamped out immediately before it infects the whole foreign policy process. It's that kind of original thinking that we need.

During the Cold War, we based our approach to the Middle East mainly according to the perceived interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Essentially, the operative principle was: What Saudi Arabia wants, Saudi Arabia gets; what Israel wants, Israel gets. That was the Washington approach to the Middle East.

It's usually thought that our relationship with Saudi Arabia is based mainly on oil and our relationship with Israel is based largely on our shared history and values. There is truth to both of those clichés. But that's not the whole story.

One of the sections in my book—and I found in the last few days that this is one that many people were quite surprised at—is about one of the hidden reasons why we were so close with Israel and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War.

That is that these are the two countries that were willing and able to give us covert, clandestine help in our Cold War operations around the world.

We had a lot of supporters during the Cold War period, but those were supporters that wanted to support us in the light of day—at the United Nations, in public. America needed other kinds of support during the Cold War. We needed people that would help us in the shadows.

For example, President [Reagan](#) wanted to arm the [military dictatorship in Guatemala](#) during the 1980s. That was forbidden by U.S. law. So he arranged for the Israelis to start sending military supplies to Guatemala. The same thing happened when he couldn't help South Africa—he got the Israelis to do it.

When we suddenly feared that [Mobutu](#) in Zaire was about to be overthrown, we needed to assemble quickly a force of mercenaries in Mauritania to go there to protect him. We needed money quickly. Saudi Arabia provided it. Saudi Arabia contributed to the [contra](#) cause. Saudi Arabia contributed to funding the [mujahideen](#) in Afghanistan. So Saudi Arabia and Israel provided us with some very important services during the Cold War that most people didn't know about at the time. That was a very important basis of the relationship.

But again, that era is over now. As we look at the Middle East, I want to take the opportunity to look forward into the future and break out of what I described as this very narrow policy rut.

I read this line recently by [Dorothy Parker](#). She had a comment about [Katharine Hepburn](#). She said, "She runs the gamut of emotions from A to B." That's something like our foreign policy approach to the Middle East. We're really stuck in this very narrow spectrum.

So I start out with the principle, which is a principle not yet accepted in Washington, that times have changed and the United States should try to find some partners to listen to in the Middle East.

We have already found, with the quick slapping down of the Turkey-Brazil deal with Iran, that the United States does not accept the view that we may not understand the best way to approach Middle East problems, and some other countries might have some better ideas than we do. America is not ready for this yet.

In a way, Turkey got a little bit ahead of the curve of the rise of the middle powers, whereas America is still trying to hold on to the old system where we ruled.

As we look forward to the 21st century—not next week or next month, but over the long term—who would be America's good partners in the Middle East?

When you're looking for geopolitical partners you're looking for countries that fulfill two criteria.

- The first is it should be a country that shares your long-term strategic goals.
- Second, there's another important piece of this, because relationships that are just between governments, just between ruling elites, are inherently unstable, and they wind up costing American support, because people in countries who don't like their government see America supporting that government, then they don't like America either.

So you need a second thing, and that is a partner should be a country whose society has something in common with your society, so that the peoples could feel some brotherhood, not just the regimes. When you look around the Muslim Middle East, you see there are only two countries that fulfill these two qualifications, and those are Iran and Turkey.

Now, how can Iran be said to share long-term strategic goals of the United States?

In the first place, Iran has a huge ability to calm Iraq. Iran probably can do more to calm Iraq than any country in the world, including the United States. In fact, we handed over that whole country to Iran essentially when we invaded and overthrew [Saddam](#). Many of those leaders of Iraq have been living in Iran for many years during the Saddam dictatorship. So the ties are very deep.

Iran also has a great ability to influence Afghanistan. A lot of Afghanistan used to be in Iran. They speak the same language. Iran has very deep ties in Afghanistan.

Iran is the bitter enemy of radical Sunni movements, like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, whose leaders want to kill every Shiite.

These are long-term strategic goals. Iran is eager to keep Russian influence out of the Middle East. Most recently, just as a result of [what happened at the Security Council yesterday](#), that has even intensified. That is a stated goal of the United States.

Meanwhile, as we are isolating Iran, companies from other countries are coming in and taking over the opportunities that might be available to guarantee our own energy and security in the future.

Turkey is probably an easier sell as a long-term ally of the United States. But still, particularly in light of what has happened in the last few weeks, it may be not so easy.

Turkey's attitude is: "We're in the neighborhood. When America charges in like a bull in a china shop, it upsets everything and we wind up holding the bag for the havoc that is created by outside intervention. That's why we want to resolve problems through conciliation and diplomacy and negotiation."

The Turks are essentially saying to the United States: "You need new partners in this part of the world, you need some advice, and we can give it to you." But the Americans are not ready for that kind of advice.

But this is the big conceptual disconnect that lies behind the friction of recent weeks, that behind this whole assertion that Turkey is trying to make lies this idea that the world is changing and this coalition of second-tier powers is rising in influence, and that if the United States wants to maintain its influence in the world, it has to accept and embrace this inevitable process.

The United States' answer is: "This process is not inevitable. We are not willing to cede our power and start listening to other people and changing our policies to the Middle East just because some other country suggests there is a better way to do that."

I do believe that Turkey in the long run still is faithful to its NATO commitments and its Western orientation. Turkey is a thriving democracy with a booming economy. It's just the country that we need to serve as a model for other Muslim countries.

What would we like other Muslim countries to be like? If there is one country to use as an example, it's Turkey—open democracy, capitalist economy, pro-European orientation. And frankly, if the European Union had not slammed the door so decisively in Turkey's face, Turkey might not be doing any of this. Turkey might be expending all of its geopolitical energy anchoring itself in the European project. So that's something for the Europeans to think about.

Now, where does this leave our old allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel?

With Saudi Arabia, we would benefit from a looser relationship. We've been too tightly on top of Saudi Arabia and too tightly on top of Arab countries for too long.

We not only have an opinion on every dispute between Arab countries, we have an opinion on many disputes within Arab countries—"This faction should be allowed into your government, but don't allow that other faction in." We're too involved. It's time for us to let Arabia be Arabia.

The Americans are very afraid of democracy in the Arab world because we fear that it will produce an Islamist alternative. The fear is probably correct. But that's something that those countries have to work through, and the longer we try to keep the lid on, the more radical that alternative is going to be when it finally emerges.

So even Saudi Arabia would benefit from this, not just us. And if that caused some problems in our supply of oil from Saudi Arabia, that would be an added bonus. That's what we need, is another kick to try to get us off our oil addiction.

As for Israel, I fear that the central problem emerging with Israel—and more and more people in the United States and in Israel are saying this—is that Israel's policies seem to lose sight of what Israel needs to guarantee its long-term survival.

Israel is picking up a very bad habit from the United States, which is thinking about foreign policy in the very short term—"What are we going to accomplish this week or this month?"—without thinking about what's going to be the effect of that in 50 years. The more I watch Chinese foreign policy, the more I understand what 50 centuries of experience does for you in planning foreign policy.

To me the greatest guarantee for Israeli security is a calm neighborhood. Israel is not going to be able to maintain its dominance through military means forever. The demographics in that region when you look at the future dictate that if Israel is surrounded by enemies that hate it, it's going to be very insecure and its long-term survival is uncertain. Therefore, friends of Israel should make it their top priority to pursue policies that will calm the region. That's the long-term guarantee for Israel.

In fact, in an odd way I see Israel in a somewhat comparable position in one respect to Iran. Those are the two countries in the region that a lot of their neighbors don't like and that a lot of other countries in the world don't like. There's a lot of anti-Iran emotion coursing around the world and a lot of anti-Israel emotion.

A lot of people would like to punish Iran or punish Israel or punish them both. There is a great impulse to denounce, sanction, and punish these countries, to force them into a corner and make them feel alone and friendless. This is a big mistake. None of the crises in the Middle East can be resolved without the involvement of Iran and Israel. These countries need to be drawn out of their isolation, out of their fear.

The United States and the world need a big security concession from Iran. The world also needs security concessions from Israel. But countries only make security concessions when they feel safe. Therefore, it should be in the interests of the United States, and particularly friends of Israel, to do whatever is possible to make that region calmer.

Trying to open broad negotiations with Iran would be a great way to do that. The Americans have obviously decided that's a non-starter. That's why they rejected the Brazil-Turkey initiative. Nonetheless, even with this regime, there would be a good reason to try that. I'm not sure it could succeed. But this regime is also very realpolitik-oriented.

If all issues were on the table, as they were, for example, at the time of the [Shanghai Communiqué](#), when we made a list of everything we didn't like about China and then the Chinese listed everything they didn't like about us, that would be a great way to start. If we could open the agenda like that, then negotiations would be promising, and they would certainly signal to the Iranian people that we were on their side.

Given what has just happened with the suppression of this [Green Movement](#) so violently, is this the right moment of the United States to engage the mullahs in Iran? Probably not. But there's never going to be a right moment, there's never going to be a good moment, so don't wait for that.

The opposition movement in Iran is in a bad situation. It has no good options. The best of the bad options is that the regime would somehow be drawn out of its fear and calm down, to allow a more open society. That's something that the outside world can do.

So here's an outline of a kind of a big idea for the future of the Middle East.

Let me conclude just by saying this. From my last few speeches—and I'm sure this will be repeated here—there are plenty of arguments with this approach. I can see why some people would want to poke holes in it or have some differences with it. I'm okay with that. I understand that this is not the be-all and the end-all for the one way to resolve our Middle East problems. But what I do insist on is let's think big, let's break out of the paradigms of the past, come up with some other bigger alternatives, think long term.

This is something that the American foreign policy establishment does not do well. That's why my message to that establishment would be a line from the great Persian poet [Rumi](#): "Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?"

Thank you.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Stephen, I want to ask you about Turkey. There has always been a worry about the fact that Turkey has a government led by a party that calls itself Islamist, and yet anybody who knows Turkey knows that does not mean it's a fundamentalist party. But there has always been that worry it might go in that direction.

You have the recent case, something you did mention, which is the snub from Europe. I wonder, do Turks feel snubbed by Europe, the European reluctance to let the Turks get into the European Union?

And is it possible that the sectarian model of government that we in the West prize in Turkey and that their view to the West, which you stay is still intact—but is it possible that the combination of that snub from the Europeans and elements within the party which feel more Islamist than maybe [Erdogan](#) himself feels could take Turkey in the direction of the East and away from the West?

STEPHEN KINZER: A very good question.

The [AKP](#), the ruling party in Turkey, doesn't like the word "Islamist." They call themselves "conservative Democrats."

This is a unique party in the entire Islamic world, certainly among ruling parties. Here is a party that has its roots in Islamic politics but has emerged as the number-one pro-European and pro-democracy party in Turkey. This doesn't really fit into our schema. It is a fantastic example also for other countries.

It doesn't mean the triumph of Islamic politics in Turkey. It actually means the opposite: It's the end, the death for Islamic politics, because you don't need Islamic politics. Islamic people who are conservative, pious believers can be in the real politics; you can be in the democratic system.

It's not like a place, for example, like Egypt, where the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) probably represents a good segment of society but it's not allowed to compete for power. Therefore, you have to have Islamic politics apart from normal politics, because Islamists are not allowed into the system. Turkey has defused that by admitting everybody into the system.

Now, there has been a lot of concern about the Islamization of Turkish society. Having just been there a couple of weeks ago, and I go there pretty regularly, I can say that certainly public displays of religiosity are probably more visible now and secularists no longer monopolize the public discourse as they used to. I don't see this as an Islamic trend. Something else is at work, and what's at work is democracy.

[Ataturk](#) was fiercely secular. Here's a quote that I dug up from him that's in my book: "Islam, this absurd theology of an immoral Bedouin, is a rotting corpse that poisons our lives." That's a nice, gentle critique of religious belief. [Laughter]

For generations, Turks were required to say, "Ataturk was the greatest person that ever lived and we support every word he ever said."

You had to say that. You had to absorb and mouth all of these beliefs. But now the lid has come off. You don't have to do that anymore. Now Turks can be whatever they want.

What's happening is that Turks are showing that they never really—or many of them—didn't really assimilate all of the extreme nature of those secular reforms. So they are able to be who they always were.

But I don't believe that Turks underestimate what they have been able to accomplish through their democratic capitalist political system. That is exactly what allowed this party to come to power. Many of the people in this party got rich by international business. They were formerly guest workers in Europe, they came back to Turkey, they started companies, they used their old contacts in Europe. This is a very cosmopolitan group, even though it does have its roots in Islam.

I don't see the Turks committing the stupidity of thinking it would be more important to follow extreme religious beliefs and give up everything they have built here in Turkey. They are very conscious of how different and how much more successful their country is than most of the other countries in the neighborhood.

As for the European Union, I do think that has proved a very costly snub. I understand Europe's point of view, and they might have felt a little offended by the Americans saying, "You should take Turkey in." It was similar to, "Why don't you take Mexico?"

Europe is going through a huge identity crisis and doesn't really know what it wants to be. But Europe is punching way below its weight in the world. Europe and Turkey together is a great alliance to project power in the world. And not only that, it is definitely in the long-term interest of the West, including Europe, for the Turkish model to be promoted in the Islamic world.

Instead, what we are promoting is the idea to Islamic countries that "No matter what you do, we're not letting you in. We don't care how democratic you become."

That does lead—maybe not in Turkey, but in some other countries—to the consideration: "Well, it's not working to look that way, so let's find another way to look."

QUESTION: Long-term policy is wonderful, except you know the expression, "In the long term we're all dead." For Israel, existentialism is a very important concept. That's not a question, that's a statement.

The question is: Is the Israeli-Palestinian issue really a straw man? If that didn't exist, how would that impact the whole Middle East arrangement of states and issues?

STEPHEN KINZER: Well, there's no doubt that peace between Israel and the Palestinians would destabilize every Arab government. That would be good, because I'd like to see some of those governments destabilized. It would certainly take away the great red handkerchief, the bloody flag, that they are able to wave. That's another reason why it's so important to try to get this solved.

The Palestine-Israel conflict is a very emotional thing for Arabs. It's not such an emotional thing for Turks or for

Iranians. Actually, certainly in Iran, and to a lesser extent in Turkey, people feel a real kinship with Jews. The Iranians will tell you, "Jews are like us. They're a very old culture, they value education, and they share our"—how can we put it?—"limited love for Arabs." Let's put it that way.

So the emotion in Iran is not high on the Palestinian side. The ordinary person in Iran has much less passionate, emotional connection to the Palestinians than the ordinary person in an Arab country.

In Turkey, what's happened is you're not seeing just some kind of an anti-Israel or Islamist wave. What's happening is it really had to do specifically with Gaza.

Gaza is what sent the Turks off the edge. It started when Erdogan was in the middle of brokering a deal between Syria and Israel and he was shuttling back and forth, and then one day, suddenly, he reads the paper and Israel has invaded some country, and that ruins my whole deal. So he got very upset and felt kind of personally betrayed by that, and he displayed a little bit more emotion than maybe he should have. That was the background to the [Davos confrontation](#). It was Gaza; it wasn't just Israel in general. That, I think, is what led to this flotilla.

You have to put yourselves in the shoes of somebody living in the Middle East—Turkey, for example—and you're watching on your TV every day, which we are not, everything that is happening in Gaza. It creates this white-hot emotion. Every incident in Gaza is replayed time and time again.

So although there are security reasons in the very short run for Israel to maintain some control over Gaza, it is also creating the seeds for such terrible long-term problems. Even Israel now, in the last few days, has started to realize that this is not good for us in the long run and we've got to find a way out of the Gaza thing.

But to me it's just part of a larger question. When I was in Israel doing my research for this book, I realized something that many of you already know, and that is that the spectrum of allowable opinion on what Israel is and does and whether it is good or bad is much broader in Israel than it is in America. There are members of the [Knesset](#) who say things every day that no American congressman could ever get away with saying. So what I'd like to do is maybe have some kind of an exchange program and let some of them come over here and we could kind of cross-fertilize.

QUESTION: Steve, that was really fascinating. But—

STEPHEN KINZER: There's always a but.

QUESTIONER: There wouldn't be a question if there weren't a but.

I'm struck by how incommensurately you talk about these two countries, Turkey and Iran, that when you talk about Turkey you're talking about the Turkish state and its policy; when you're talking about Iran, at least the things we should feel good about, you're talking about the Iranian people, Iran's history, Iran's culture, a politics it had once upon a time but doesn't have now.

So while I can very well see why we should be conducting a policy such that when that state is different from the way it is now, we will view it as a regional anchor, in the same way that we can view Turkey now. But since that state now doesn't share those views that you were ascribing to the Iranian people—that they love Americans, they love Jews—quite the opposite, I don't understand what it is you think we can do now with that state while they are what in fact they are.

STEPHEN KINZER: That's obviously a very good question.

Here's my idea for how we ought to try approaching Iran. I do think that for me actually the most interesting paragraph in the [National Intelligence Estimate](#) that came out a couple of years ago about the Iran nuclear program was something that didn't have to do with the nuclear program at all. It said: "We judge with a high degree of certainty that the Iran regime carefully calculates benefits and risks in the world that is based on a realpolitik approach to foreign policy." That certainly reflects what I see. So I see several approaches.

First of all, I do think we should try to see if Iran could be enticed to the table with a broad agenda. You know, they actually offered to do this in a quite dramatic letter in 2003, which the [Bush](#) Administration just threw into the garbage can. I don't know if that offer is still out there.

There are great advantages for Iran to accepting something like this. I could see that, at the very least, it would set off disputes within the Iranian ruling circle, which would be positive for us. It would reassure the Iranian people that we truly are interested in dialogue, which I don't think they believe now, and I think they're right. So that would be the first step. We should try to make an effort to negotiate with this regime. It's very possible that

that effort would not succeed.

Then I would say Plan B is just don't do anything now that is going to endanger this huge strategic asset we have in Iran, which is the pro-American sentiment of the Iranian people. Let's not do anything now that's going to make our long-term project more difficult. If we can't achieve something now, let's at least try to make sure that we're not upsetting the possibility of letting something happen in the future.

QUESTION: So the targeted sanctions that were just passed by the Security Council, would that count as the kind of thing that would needlessly turn the Iranian people against us?

STEPHEN KINZER: I don't like this sanctions resolution, not on principle grounds. I'm not against sanctions on a moral basis. But I'm just asking: What's the endgame here? What are we hoping to achieve?

These sanctions are, in the first place, very weak. But secondly, there's a great misunderstanding of the Iranian psyche.

For historical reasons; Iran has been ripped apart for 200 years by foreigners. And, for psychological reasons having to do with the emphasis on sacrifice of Shiite Islam, Iran is not equipped to get down on its knees and say, "Oh, foreign powers want us to do this; we better bend down." In fact, there is nothing more glorious in Shiite iconography than to suffer in the cause of justice.

So I don't think these sanctions are going to achieve anything. That's my worry about them.

And I don't see them as part of the peaceful option. I actually see them as part of the war option. Everyone knows these sanctions will not bring about the desired result. When they don't bring about the desired result, that then gives you the excuse to say, "We tried everything, we even tried sanctions, but they didn't work. So now we have to go to the military option." That's what I'm afraid of.

Turkey and Brazil were saying to us: That's the worst of all possible options. That's even worse than a nuclear-armed Iran.

America is not prepared to accept that view yet. But I do think that's the one that the Turks are trying to bring us to believe.

QUESTION: Following up on that question, one heard a few months ago, a bit less of that now, that there was a serious danger of a possible preemptive attack on Iran by Israel. I'd just like to know your thoughts in terms of how you can moderate the Israeli posture towards Iran and keep this situation fairly cool.

STEPHEN KINZER: The way to do it would be to do something that Israel doesn't want us to do, which is to try to make an approach to Iran. That option is probably still out there but it's kind of distant.

Let me just recount a story that happened to me when I was in Israel working on this book. I actually participated in a conference about Iran. You can imagine what it's like going through immigration at the Tel Aviv airport when they say, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to talk about Iran."

"You've got to come into this room then and then explain what that is."

That was almost as much fun as being told at the Tehran airport "If you get back on the flight to Frankfurt in six hours, we're going to give you this pass and you can wait in the first-class lounge. If you don't agree, we're going to put you in jail."

I had to think: "Okay, which is better, first-class lounge or jail?"

One of the kids who was with this immigration guy said, "It's not really a jail, it's just a detention center, but it's not very nice." So I chose the first-class lounge.

While I was in Israel, the participants in this Iran conference were taken to a private dinner afterward. There we had one of the most prominent leaders of the Israeli government steeped in intelligence matters to give us a very private briefing. So I can't give you his name, but you can probably guess who it was. He gave us kind of a [tour d'horizon](#) of how Israel sees the world. Of course, most of it was based on Iran; that was what they were very focused on.

He said something which was really interesting, and that's probably why it was off the record.

"You're reading in your newspapers wherever you live that Israel is terrified of Iran getting a nuclear bomb because once they get the bomb, they're going to bomb us. Actually that's half true. We are terrified about Iran getting a nuclear bomb, we really don't want them to get it, but not for that reason. That sounds good in the outside world, it makes sense, but it's not true.

Nobody in our security establishment really believes that Iran would ever do something so suicidal as to drop a nuclear bomb on Israel. We know that's not going to happen. But we don't contradict that in public because it's like the weapons of mass destruction argument during the Iraq war—it's a unifying argument; it seems to make sense, even if it's not true."

"But," he said, "we have other reasons. We have two other reasons why we're really worried about the Iranian nuclear project. Number one is, when you have a nuclear weapon, your ability to intimidate your neighbors and push people around dramatically increases."

I didn't want to say, "Oh, you should know."

"But," he said, "we don't want that, we don't want Iran to be at that level."

"Secondly, we're very afraid that if Iran gets a nuclear bomb, other countries in the region are going to want it. You're going to have particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey wanting nuclear programs, and then we really are in trouble."

"So," he said, "Israel is just as afraid of the Iranian nuclear bomb as we say we are, but not for the reasons that you're reading about in your newspapers."

QUESTION: We read that the day after tomorrow there are expected to be massive demonstrations in Iran on the anniversary of the Green protests last year after the election. I take it from what you are saying that you do not believe the United States should react in any particularly pointed way to those demonstrations.

STEPHEN KINZER: I was actually very impressed with the [restraint that the Americans showed during last year's uprising](#). It's a peculiarity of Iran and it's a peculiarity of the U.S.-Iran relationship that makes it very bad for the United States to think about trying to tell Iranians who should be in power and who's good and who's bad. All Iranians react against that.

I can tell you that the people organizing the Green Movement do not want American support any more than the government wants America to support the Green Movement. It's good for everybody for the United States to keep out.

Of course, there is a political benefit in the United States to saying, "Obama's being a total wimp. Why isn't he getting up and saying, 'This is all evil and we must denounce that criminal regime?'"

If you know the history of Iran and the history of U.S.-Iran relations, you understand why being patient and keeping your hands off is probably a good policy.

I truly believe that we're going to get the result that we want in Iran if we can be patient and we can wait. But that's something that we're not good at.

QUESTION: First, when you first began your presentation you mentioned about the Iran contra situation with Reagan. I think you said Guatemala instead of Nicaragua. That was your first book.

STEPHEN KINZER: The Guatemalan army was armed by Israel. The contras in Nicaragua were also armed in part by Israel.

QUESTIONER: The other thing is when you gave short shrift to the Europeans supposedly slamming the door in the Turks' face, President [Giscard d'Estaing](#) said, "Well, the Turks are not Europeans," number one.

Number two, both the Turks and the Iranians have been causing some problems in Europe. The Iranians were involved with Bosnia and also in Kosovo. The Turks are presenting some problems in many different ways. So Europe has not been without Islamic influence for very long. The Ottoman Empire didn't really end until World War I. But there is some concern with the demographics of Europe here. So it goes beyond trying to slam the door in the Turks' faces. There is some history beyond trying to exclude them from being very, very important in European affairs.

STEPHEN KINZER: You're absolutely right. I do think that Europe slammed the door in Turkey's face, but Europe

has its own reasons. You're absolutely right.

Part of it is this old Giscard d'Estaing/[Helmut Schmidt](#) position of the Turks as just the "other" and they're the representation of barbarism in the world. That came from a very old generation. When I was writing my book about Turkey, I actually met an elderly lady in Vienna who told me she could remember as a kid being put to bed by her nanny who told her, "If you don't go to sleep soon the Turk is going to come and get you." So you still have that overlay in Europe.

Then of course, another problem in Europe is that when you look out your window and look at a Turk in many European cities, it's liable to be somebody from a village who has a head scarf and only speaks Turkish. It drives the educated Turks crazy to realize that it's these people who are giving the image of Turkey in Europe.

Of course Turkey is a big country. Movement of labor would be a big challenge, solidarity funds would be a big problem, agricultural policy poses a lot of challenges. And behind that, of course, is this cultural thing. There is still a debate about whether the European Union is a geographical community or is it a community of values.

It was a big shame for Turkey internally that it has this break with Europe, because the European Union was the principal outside dynamic propelling the democratization process in Turkey. Now you're seeing kind of this downward spiral, where the Turks are saying, "Well, Europe's not letting us in, so why should we follow all their rules anyway?"

That slows the reform process. And then the Europeans are saying, "Look, the reform process is slowing down, so that gives us even more reason to keep the door closed." Unless somebody breaks out of this cycle—and I don't see that happening anytime soon—we're going to see this same cleavage between Turkey and Europe.

QUESTION: I want to just draw you out a little bit on President Obama himself. He presented himself in Cairo as an agent of change in the Middle East. Do you think he did not understand what that entailed? Do you think he has changed his mind? Do you think the realities of the Israeli-Palestine issue have sort of blocked him? You know, he tried to push on a settlement freeze and got pushed back. Where is the agent-of-change idea one year later in President Obama's foreign policy?

STEPHEN KINZER: When Obama was running for president, to me the most remarkable phenomenon—and it's one that Obama himself actually referred to—was that he was such a blank slate that so many of us projected onto him our own beliefs. He managed to persuade many people, including people who didn't agree with each other at all, "Obama can't say it, but he really believes what I believe." This was a huge achievement for a politician.

Foreign policy was one area where many of us had some hopes or we extrapolated from things that Obama said. It's certainly true that many of those hopes have not been realized up until now.

I'm looking at the Washington foreign policy establishment pretty much as an outsider. I actually know a lot about the politics of many countries, but the United States is not one of them.

I do see that the foreign policy tradition, let's say, in Washington is extremely powerful. It draws people into the consensus, particularly presidents. That is actually a great Ph.D. thesis—it has probably already been written several times. How that happens is a very intriguing process, particularly when someone comes in who is a complete outsider in terms of foreign policy. So I would just make a few other observations.

First of all, if you can say something to excuse President Obama, he has had one or two other things on the agenda. So he hasn't been able to focus on this quite yet.

Again, as I mentioned earlier, he has never really thought through these issues, because Obama has never had a job before when he had to think about international security and how to reconfigure the world. If he had been doing that for ten years, we might be in a different position now.

And finally, I'd say this. There's still time. We've heard some hints. When Obama said a month or two ago it is in the urgent national security interest of the United States to resolve the Middle East crisis, that was kind of an intriguing statement. So he's still got a couple more years on his term, and—who knows?—there could be another term.

This is obviously on the back burner for now. It's very odd that we can't even figure out who makes Middle East policy now. Find out for me who makes U.S. policy toward Iran. Who's in charge? I don't believe anybody is.

We have this odd situation where our Secretary of State [[Hillary Clinton](#)] is the most famous woman in the world and she's treated like a rock star wherever she goes, but yet she has very little influence on the shaping of

American foreign policy. It's concentrated in the White House. Some of it's in the National Security Council.

These are big decisions that in the end only a president is going to be able to make. I think Obama realizes that. That may be one of the reasons why he hasn't wanted to make them up until now. But I'm still interested to see what's ahead.

QUESTION: Whenever you hear [Niall Ferguson](#) speak about crises and things, he always makes the point that things may be bad here but you've got to figure out whether they're worse in the counterview of adversaries. So my question is really directed to which side has the most time here.

When you look at the West—I know nothing about Iran really—when you look at the West, you've got a demographic problem, an aging problem. We've got chaotic public finance—Japan, Europe, the United States. We've got nuclear leakage from Pakistan—I don't know why the Iranians want to buy centrifuges, they can get a bomb from Pakistan; [they've done it before](#).

So how much time do we have; how much time do they have? That's what I'm getting at.

STEPHEN KINZER: Well, in part, I guess, it depends on who the "they" is. The "they" is always shifting.

You're absolutely right, that there are some terrifying threats to the West out there. These are almost all threats that can only be met multilaterally. Whether it's terrorism, global warming, pandemics, threat of nuclear proliferation, or financial crises, these are not problems that can ever be limited to any one country. What that says to the United States is that if you want to maintain your position of dominance, you have to accept changes in the world.

Some people in Washington would say: "No. That means our voluntary surrender of power. We're not going to do that. We're going to wait until somebody pushes us off the peak. Meanwhile we're staying on top, and we don't feel like we have to moderate our ambitions."

To me this is the great question for the coming decades: Is the United States going to follow a policy where we insist that we can still maintain our dominant policy, the one that our foreign policy establishment got used to during the Cold War? Or is the best way to maintain our relative dominance in an era in which our relative power is declining, is to find other partners in the world who share our values and to take a more constructive and, let's say, diplomatic-oriented, Turkish-oriented approach to the world? That's the question Americans have to deal with.

I understand that it's a highly sensitive question politically. Is the Democratic Party, based on its history, now ready to be the party that sends its president over to Iran to embrace the Holocaust-denying, demonstrator-murdering tyrant over there [[Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#)]?

I can imagine many people whispering into Obama's ear, or Obama whispering into his own ear, "That's not good for us for the next 20 years." How are we going to break out of that?

These are political problems. Interestingly enough, I've got a couple of friends in Washington who are very conservative Republican congressmen. In fact, I guess that's the only kind of Republican congressmen there are anymore. I've gotten emails from both of them telling me how much they liked my book because it's based on essentially interests, it's based on realpolitik.

I'm totally against emotion as a factor in foreign policy. Emotion is always the enemy of wise statesmanship. And that's our problem with Iran.

We're so caught up, we're so angry at Iran, because of taking away our [Shah](#) and [imprisoning our diplomats](#) and undermining our power in so many ways, sometimes quite violently, all over the world that we really want to get back at them. We've got to calm down and leave that outside the door and realize what's in our own long-term interest.

All countries shape their policies according to their own interests. But America is an exception, in the sense that we don't like to admit it. The ordinary American has this kind of childish innocence that makes us say, "Selfish countries act in their own interests, but we only act in the benefit of world peace and NATO and human rights and what's good for the world. In fact, we sacrifice ourselves in order to bring good benefits to other countries."

It would be great for Americans to leave that delusion behind and to say: "Yes, we act for our own benefit." And that's good, I'm all for that, with only one caveat: think carefully about what really is for your benefit over the long run and don't take steps that redeem your emotions in the short run and make you feel good but actually harm your national security in the long run.

JOANNE MYERS: I thank you for being so refreshing this morning.

STEPHEN KINZER: Thank you all.

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