Introduction
In recent times we have begun to see a gradual but subtle decline in the acrimony that has characterized mutual perceptions of the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. From the Iranian perspective, the most undeniable sign of improvement began with President Mohammad Khatami’s address to the American people via a CNN interview where he advocated a “dialogue of civilizations.” Other indicators have included an assortment of Track II type meetings between Iranians and Americans, sporting competition between the two countries, a modest increase in U.S. tourism to Iran, opportunities for American students to study in Iran, and a variety of other extremely limited improvements. Far more significant have been comments by senior American officials such as a speech delivered by Secretary of State Madeline Albright to the Asia Society last spring, and more recently, comments made by President Clinton at a Holocaust Day memorial ceremony at the White House. Other factors which have contributed to an improvement include public statements by such well known Americans as James Baker and Lee Hamilton, as well as a Foreign Affairs article by Zbignew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft. The common theme linking these pronouncements is a generalized recognition of the importance of Iran, and the utility to the United States of gradually re-establishing some sort of relationship with this key country. These efforts have been aided by the fact that most U.S. allies have improved their relations with Iran. The United Kingdom and Iran have agreed to re-establish diplomatic ties at the highest level, reflecting British satisfaction that official Iranian government support for the assassination of Salman Rushdie has come to an end. Having said this, the bounty on Rushdie’s life by an Iranian bonyad (foundation) remains in place and was even increased in value. In this apparent paradox, we find intra-Iranian disagreement about ties with the West which remains a primary impediment to greater U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. Finally, other actions which have generally been interpreted positively in Tehran include the unwillingness of the White House to enforce the Iran-Libyan Sanctions Act (ILSA) on foreign oil companies dealing with Iran
(the French company Total being the company in question), a recent suspension of the use of food and medicine as an economic weapon by the United States which could clear the way for an American grain sale to Iran, and a general lessening of tensions on both sides whose significance is important but should at all costs not be exaggerated.

**Lingering Problems**

Although it appears that most Americans, official and otherwise, seem to be persuaded by President Khatami’s overture to the American people, it must also be recognized that the three issues that have traditionally divided the two countries, from an American perspective, remain significant, even though the magnitude of their significance may have lessened over time. The first of these is reliance by the Islamic Republic on terrorism which clearly has diminished in recent years. The next gap results from Iran’s opposition to the American brokered Arab-Israeli peace effort. For various reasons, this too seems to have diminished in significance. In part, this diminution is a reflection of a reported discussion between the Iranian leadership and Yasir Arafat at the OIC meeting in Tehran in which Arafat was told by his Iranian interlocutors that although the Islamic Republic might not favor an agreement made between Arafat and the Israelis, that whatever agreement Arafat chose to make would be accepted by Tehran. The diminished pace of the Arab-Israeli peace process has made Iran’s aversion to it somewhat less significant, although the salience of this problem will continue until Iran is willing to publicly and unconditionally accept any Arab-Israeli peace arrangement deemed acceptable by Israel and the Arab world. Having said this, a debate about Iran, not unlike that being held in the United States, is also emerging in Israel with knowledgeable Israelis trying to reassess Iran’s regional role and its implications for Israel in much the same way that Americans have conducted parallel assessments of their own of Iran.

The final issue, and the one that remains of greatest significance, is Iran’s attempt to develop a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability. Here, the particular
concern of the U.S. is Iran’s drive to acquire nuclear weapons. From an Iranian perspective, acquisition of these weapons can be understood as a reflection of Tehran’s concern about Iran’s regional status and attempts by its neighbors to acquire the same weapons. The recent nuclear test by Pakistan, efforts by Saddam Hussein to acquire a nuclear capability which was slowed but certainly not eliminated by an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities, the possibility of “loose nukes” floating around former Soviet Central Asia, and Iran’s inability to rearm itself due to a weak economy and low oil prices, as well as the residual consequences of a debilitating eight year war with Iraq, all conspire to make nuclear weapons a comparatively cheap security alternative for the government of the Islamic Republic. Despite this, the United States is unwilling to sanction such acquisition and, indeed, Iran’s nuclear program has not only continued to divide the U.S. and Iran, but also has contributed markedly to increased conflict between the United States and Russia, which is clearly one of Iran’s primary supporters. Thus, if asked to choose the primary impediment to rapprochement with Iran from a U.S. perspective, I would argue that the nuclear issue clearly reigns supreme, although the peace process and terrorism issues could reassert themselves depending upon conditions in Tehran.

Impediments to rapprochement exist not only in the United States, but also in Iran as well. Despite modest improvements in mutual perceptions, in Iran there remains significant distrust of the United States, its methods, and its motives. This can be attributed to a complex mélange of factors including the Mossadeqh affair, U.S. support for the Shah, the U.S. commitment to Israel, and a generalized belief amongst many, certainly not all, Iranians, official and the man in the street, that the United States government wishes Iran ill. Although these negative perceptions have diminished among some in recent years, amongst others they remain tremendously significant.

According to some Iranians, the United States can do no right. For example, attempts by NATO to assist Kosovar Muslims are regarded as laudable, except when
such attempts have their origins in Washington. In fact, some Iranians find themselves conflicted over this issue as they believe that these beleaguered Muslims should be assisted, but not by the United States. This contradiction is important and results from systemic differences, cultural misunderstandings, and a legacy of distrust which is difficult to erase. It is further exacerbated by the fact that although President Khatami has shown himself to be a sophisticated observer of the U.S. political scene, as well as of U.S. intentions, he does not have unquestionable control of all components of the Iranian political system. His opponents use his comparatively moderate views of the West in general, and the United States in particular, as a means to undermine him. Thus, periodic negative comments by Khatami about the United States and its policies, although they may or may not reflect his personal views, also should be perceived as attempts to keep his critics at bay by his not appearing to be overly pro-American. The culture of distrust towards the United States in Iran is palpable and significant, yet at times contradictory and ephemeral. It is difficult to pin it down with any specificity, although it undoubtedly exists, and this distrust serves as a significant road block to rapprochement between the two countries. This culture is part of a broader uncertainty in Iran about the qualities and character of the Islamic Republic itself, which asserts itself periodically in peculiar and unanticipated ways. For example, it is generally thought that President Khatami’s recent trip to Italy, his meeting with the Pope as part of his dialogue of civilizations effort, and other activities related to this trip represent a diplomatic triumph for Iran. At the same time however, a parallel trip to France was canceled in large part because President Khatami could not allow himself to be photographed at meetings or at dinner tables in which wine bottles would be visible and spirits might be served by his European hosts! France refused to relent and to abstain from serving alcohol. Although this conflict between the Islamically mandated abstemiousness of the Islamic Republic, and the oenophilia of France seems almost comical, it is all too real and prevented an important state visit from coming to pass.
Such sensitivity, when applied to the United States, is of even greater significance, and highlights an insecurity and uncertainty amongst the stewards of the Islamic Republic about what is desirable and acceptable for and in Iran, and what is not.

**Conclusions**

The challenge to both the U.S. and to Iran is for each to maintain its core principles while, at the same time, enhancing its interests by seeking further rapprochement with a country too important to be ignored. The United States will not back down from its commitment to Israel, to its democratic principles, and to other values held dear by the American people. The Iranians for their part, will maintain their commitment to the notion and the reality of an Islamic Republic, despite their own uncertainty about what such a polity is meant to look like or how it should comport itself internationally. Khatami’s efforts are serious and should be regarded as such. Excessive U.S. attraction to Khatami will hurt him in the eyes of his competitors who eagerly seek new pretexts for conflict with the U.S. and instruments to undermine him. On the other hand, if we ignore Khatami’s gestures, this will make rapprochement from Tehran even more difficult. Thus, the United States is presented with a significant challenge. Certainly, whatever Washington does it will be criticized or misinterpreted by some in Tehran. This is inevitable, yet nonetheless problematic, and, thus makes the process of rapprochement even more difficult. One way to transcend some of these divisions is to devote greater attention to areas in which the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran actually have issues in common. These range from the continuing threat of Saddam Hussein, to concern over the excesses of the Taliban in Afghanistan, in whom neither Washington nor Tehran has much confidence. Other common issues exist, such as the problem of drug trafficking, on which Iran has taken a hard line. Certainly the legacy of distrust between these two countries cannot be erased. Nonetheless, it could be muted somewhat in recognition of areas in which the two
countries actually share some interests and might even be attenuated by remote collaboration, or at least, mutual understanding.

**Recent Developments and New Complications**

Since this statement was initially written, two other factors have emerged as potentially significant complications to any attempted rapprochement between the United States and Iran. The first was the arrest of 13 Jews in Shiraz on charges of espionage for Israel. Although this arrest has been interpreted by many Khatami supporters as an attempt by extremists to undermine President Khatami, the reality remains that the 13 remain, at this writing, in custody. Without a speedy and complete exoneration, there is a strong likelihood that many in the U.S. will regard President Khatami as lacking the necessary authority to promote any sort of rapprochement. This skepticism is not restricted to the United States alone, but extends to a number of Western European powers as well, many of whom have expressed in the strongest possible terms their concern over the fate of the prisoners. Even if these arrests are indeed an attempt by Khatami’s opponents to undermine him, their ability to do just this certainly injects a significant note of uncertainty about his ability to rule. This uncertainty has been heightened even further by another development which is of extreme importance.

In recent days there have been significant clashes between students at Tehran University, said to be supporters of President Khatami, and those critical of the students and, of Khatami as well, who represent key parts of the government beyond Khatami’s control, most notably the military and intelligence services. Although the conflict between the groups appears to have been suppressed, at least for the moment, the smoldering tensions between them remains. And facile explanations about “pro-democratic forces” in conflict with more authoritarian elements fail, in my view, to capture the complexity of the political factionalism within Iran. The United States is in a difficult situation, as any official comments made by U.S. officials are likely to be used
by extremist elements against President Khatami. The recent demonstration in Washington by émigré Iranian groups exacerbates this problem further as these groups are attempting to exploit the conflict in Tehran as a means to advance their own political agendas. In short, there is no ideal position for the United States to adopt other than to make it abundantly clear to all, that the evolution of domestic Iranian politics is an area to which the United States is attentive, but in which it has no actual involvement. Certainly there are those in Iran who will not accept such a statement at face value even though, in my view, it is accurate. But the current tensions in Iran, which are unlikely to abate soon, further complicate possible rapprochement with the United States and frustrate the efforts of those elements of the Iranian state apparatus who may seek such an improvement.