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White House wrestles with Iran crisis

Critics say secret US arms deal won't win friends and influence Tehran

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Washington

It is not President Reagan's broad objective in Iran that is drawing fire but the methods of achieving it.

Diplomatic experts give the President credit for publicly recognizing the strategic importance of Iran and seeking to break the ice of hostility that has surrounded US-Iranian relations ever since the Islamic fundamentalists came to power in Tehran. For too long, say knowledgeable observers, the United States has scorned Iran's revolutionary regime and wishfully hoped it would turn out to be a temporary phenomenon.

"Iran cannot be treated as a pariah," says William Quandt, a Mideast specialist at the Brookings Institution. "Iran must be pleased that the US is ready for a better relationship. That was long overdue."

But, after a massive public relations effort to defend its secret talks with Tehran over an 18-month period, the White House has failed to convince members of Congress or the diplomatic community that the tactics it employed measured up to the objective. It is widely charged that the White House diplomatic overture was conducted amateurishly and without sufficient understanding of Iranian conditions and psychology.

Diplomats with experience in the Middle East say Mr. Reagan and his aides exercised poor judgment in what is now admitted to have been a largely Central Intelligence Agency operation. They make these points:

- It does not make sense for the United States, as it adjusts its policy toward Iran,

to do it through Israel. What, in fact, was Israel's role? According to press reports, the Israelis provided substantial quantities of arms to Iran in the midst of the covert talks, appearing to belie the administration claim that the shipment of US arms was "miniscule."

Experts say the US could have approached any number of countries - Algeria, Turkey, Pakistan - to help open the channels of communication with Iran. By using Israel, Washington has strained its relations with the moderate Arab states and risked undermining its long-term strategic influence in the region.

"Using Israel is a great mistake," says Hermann Eilts, former ambassador to Egypt. "The Iranian government is

strongly anti-Israeli and the belief that a few people willing to talk to Israel will change Iran's objective is short-sighted."

- Making a "downpayment" in arms shipments is not the best way to begin a dialogue with an ostensibly hostile state. The President and his close aides argue that Henry Kissinger used secret methods when he opened the door to communist China. But the US did not provide Peking with weapons.

In the case of Iran, say diplomatic experts, the US can enhance its credibility best by "accepting" the Iranian revolution. The fact that the Reagan administration still has a rhetorical stance suggesting that Iran is "beyond the pale" of civilized nations appears to contradict the effort to lay the ground for better ties. Dealing in arms transactions does not enhance US credibility, say experts.

- The President's denial to the contrary, it still appears the US made an "arms for hostages" deal with Iran. Suspicion lingers that it was primarily the hostage question that drove the secret mission of former National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane.

- The supply of "defensive" arms may not be as innocuous as the White House says. Among the US arms shipment were parts for anti-aircraft missiles. State Department officials say the only reason Iran has not launched a major offensive against Iraq and tried to seize a sizeable chunk of territory is that its supply lines are vulnerable to Iraqi aircraft.

"Iran has been poised to win the war for some time," says a Senate expert. To say the US has sent a "miniscule" amount of equipment is misleading, he says. be-

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cause sometimes just a bolt or hinge can make a plane or tank operational. "The political implications are incredible," he adds. If Iran wins the war, he observes, the US will be blamed because "the entire Arab world is going to look around and say 'look what America did.'"

• It is a question whether the White House acted legally, as the President says. Reagan waived an executive order issued by President Carter prohibiting arms shipments to Iran. But can he waive the Arms Export Control Act passed by Congress, a law banning military exports to countries sponsoring terrorism?

News reports that the White House kept the arms shipments secret from the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as congressional intelligence committees have further fueled lawmakers' resolve to probe the covert operation. National Security Advisor John Poindexter said on NBC's Meet the Press yesterday that because this was not a "military situation" it was not unusual that the Joint Chiefs were not informed.

Admiral Poindexter said the White House was "anxious" to discuss the operation with the appropriate committees. But he added there are still many details it wants to keep classified in order to salvage as much as possible of the channel of communication.

Asked about the state of the remaining American hostages, Poindexter said, "It's a very iffy situation at the moment." But, said Poindexter, although chances for release of the hostages had been damaged, if the situation in Tehran stabilizes it is possible "we can still make some progress."

A He added that he would probably talk to Congress only informally, and that CIA Director William Casey would formally lay out the administration's position.

Specialists on Iran fault the judgment of the administration in attempting secret talks at this particular period, when Iran is in the throes of a severe struggle for political power as the Khomeini era wanes.

"The political situation is tremendously unsettled," says William Beeman, an anthropologist at Brown University. "The President talks about 'moderate' factions in Iran. But a better name would be 'rapacious pragmatists.' They are men who will maintain their power at any cost. . . . And we do not know where the chips will fall in another month or two."

Dr. Beeman, a consultant to the State Department at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis in the Carter administration, says that for a decade now the US has had a tendency to make complicated decisions without understanding the intricacies of Iranian society.

"Keeping the communication channel open is one thing, but I would not enter into a bargaining situation and try to take sides," says Beeman. The US, he stresses, is at a gross disadvantage in negotiating with the Iranians, who he says are clever and often double-crossing "bazaar merchants."

"If you're going to bargain with them, it's wise to take another merchant with you," says the scholar.