



# US Defense Secretary urges more private US contacts with Iran

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said he thought more visits to Iran by private American citizens might help bridge differences between the two countries.

But Gates, who in 2004 advocated greater diplomatic engagement with Iran, said Wednesday he believed it would not be useful now to negotiate with the government headed by President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.

"We need to figure out a way to develop some leverage with the Iranians and then sit down and talk with them," he said in a talk at the American Academy of Diplomacy, referring to general US relations with Tehran.

"If there is going to be a discussion then they need something, too," he said. "We can't go to a discussion and be completely the 'demandeur' with them not feeling they do not need anything from us."

But he said the United States should look for ways outside of government "to open up the channels and get more of a flow of people back and forth."

"There are actually a fair number of Iranians that come to the United States to visit," he said.

"We ought to increase the flow going the other way, not of Iranians but of Americans, and that may be one way of creating some space perhaps over some period of time."

US tensions with Iran have risen sharply in recent weeks amid accusations by Washington that Tehran is funding, training and arming Shiite groups to attack US and coalition forces in Iraq.

Iran rebuffed a US overture to hold a fourth round of talks with Iranians on the situation in Iraq.