



## An Iranian Nuclear Breakout Is Not Inevitable

**Patrick Clawson**

**A**s 2012 begins, Iranian leaders remain confident they can continue their uranium enrichment, plutonium reprocessing, and missile development programs despite UN Security Council orders to suspend such activities. Accordingly, they have shown no interest in resolving the nuclear impasse, and many Western commentators are doubtful that the regime will ever restore international confidence in the purely peaceful intentions of its nuclear program. Yet neither Tehran's bluster nor Western pessimism are fully warranted. In fact, progress can be made. And progress, not breakthrough to a complete resolution of all differences, is the appropriate test.

### **The Exaggerated Worries of Pessimists**

To understand the challenges, let us look at them as seen from the strictly pessimistic point of view. Pessimists argue that the international community is adjusting to the unfortunate reality that nothing can be done to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability or even a weapon itself. They think that outside powers cannot do much because each of the potential instruments is too weak to affect the iron determination of Iran's leaders. In the pessimistic view:

- **Sanctions will add burden to Iran's economy but are unlikely to lead the leadership to change direction on the nuclear program.**

Iran is adjusting to the increasingly harsh sanctions imposed on it. Even if the West were to take severe measures—suspending purchases of Iranian oil and freezing the assets of its central bank, as proposed in November 2011 by French president Nicolas Sarkozy—Iran would find a way to muddle through. Cooperation from China and Russia on tougher sanctions is slow in coming and partial in execution. Furthermore, even

---

*The author participated in a not-for-attribution November 15 meeting at The Washington Institute with government officials, experts on Iran, and experts on approaches the government has used in other difficult situations. This Policy Note represents solely the author's conclusions after the daylong discussion; it does not represent the position of anyone else at the meeting.*

if the international community were prepared to take steps to cripple Iran's economy, Tehran's hardline leaders would accept that as a price for the nuclear program they value so highly.

- **Diplomatic negotiations with Iran are unlikely to lead to an agreement because the minimum Iran will accept does not overlap with the maximum to which the West can agree.** In the language of negotiation, there is no “zone of possible agreement.” Iran insists on retaining at least a substantial nuclear breakout capability; the West insists that Iran can have no more than a tightly constrained enrichment program; and neither side is very comfortable with going that far toward a compromise. The last two rounds of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany), in Geneva in December 2010 and Istanbul in January 2011, were disastrous. Neither side thought the other was being serious, because each side has such vastly different expectations about the basic issues at stake in the negotiations. And in Iran's highly fractured political environment, anyone who proposes a compromise will be attacked viciously by his rivals. Plus, Tehran's track record to date gives no assurance Iran would actually implement any agreement reached, at least not for very long.
- **Iran's civil society is not going to challenge the regime any time soon.** The pro-democracy forces are not well organized, they have weak leadership, and they lack the stomach for confrontation shown by protestors in Arab countries from Libya to Syria to Yemen. Moreover, Iranian pro-democracy forces are not well-enough aware of techniques that have worked in other countries to put them into effect. The hardliners have a solid core of support that they can rely on to engage in vicious repression, plus the regime has been quite clever in isolating activists and steering the population away from politics. And even if reformists were to come to power, their interest is in domestic issues. In line with their proud nationalist stance, they might not change Iran's

nuclear position much, and they would expect the West to bend so as to support them.

- **Military action offers poor prospects for delaying Iran for very long.** Iran's known nuclear program is widely scattered, with many sites heavily fortified, and there could well be clandestine sites. Even if the existing program were largely destroyed, Iran would retain the knowledge necessary to rebuild, and it could have greater determination to do so. After an attack, Iran might explicitly decide to go for nuclear weapons. The international consensus for curtailing Iran's nuclear program could evaporate; indeed, several other countries might conclude that the only way to protect against potential U.S. attack is to acquire their own nuclear weapons. Military attack might rally Iranians behind the regime. Iran might retaliate with terrorism, rockets fired at Israel by its Hizballah allies, or attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.
- **Israel's timetable regarding Iran is much shorter than that of the United States, meaning that Jerusalem is likely to decide whether to take dramatic military action much more quickly than Washington would like.** Israel may make its decision without informing the United States, on the principle that forgiveness is easier to obtain than permission. A major attack by Israel would cause many complications for the United States no matter the outcome of the raid—if the attack inflicts much damage without inducing much negative reaction, the United States will look weak, dithering, and ill informed because of its prior opposition; if the attack causes little damage and leads to extensive outrage and mayhem, the United States will bear much of the cost.
- **World energy markets remain tight.** Oil prices will almost certainly remain as high as they are at present, meaning that Iran will continue to rake in so much foreign exchange that it can afford with relative ease the additional costs imposed by sanctions. Were the United States and its allies to take

actions to impede Iranian oil exports, that could well drive up crude oil prices, with the result that Iran's income rises while Western economies are hard-hit. The potential boomerang effect undermines the credibility of any Western threat to act against Iranian oil exports.

All these issues are real. The Iranian nuclear impasse is not an easy problem to solve. But, in fact, the Obama administration is more correct than the pessimists when it sees room for action in 2012 on all these fronts. The Iranian nuclear problem is very unlikely to be resolved any time soon, but progress can be made.

Perhaps the most progress will come from encouraging geopolitical developments. Whereas a few years ago Iran's star appeared to be rising and that of the United States fading, today that is much less the case. The U.S. effort in Iraq has been reasonably successful, and the Taliban is no longer advancing from strength to strength in Afghanistan. In Libya, the Western alliance has shown that, under certain circumstances, it can successfully use vigorous military force against oppressive regimes. And, most important, Iran's closest—arguably, its only—regional ally is in deep trouble. The problems of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad fit poorly with Iranian leaders' "resistance narrative," according to which radical Islam is the wave of history and is supported by the region's peoples, while the United States and its allies—Israel and the moderate Arab states—are on the wane and lack popular support. Iran's support in the "Arab street," so prized by the regime, has slipped badly as Tehran is seen as backing a brutal dictator, while the wave of history is with popular protests against authoritarians.

Assad's fall would be a particularly difficult blow for hardliners who have interpreted the Syrian president's troubles as the result of a Western plot similar to that purportedly behind the protests in Iran after the contested 2009 presidential elections. Iran's regional influence is also being hurt as Assad's troubles affect the Hizballah movement in Lebanon, which has been Iran's closest international partner and an important Iranian instrument of deterrence against an Israeli attack. A

further complication for Iran is that its stance on Syria has shaken the Turkish establishment's view that Turkey and Iran could cooperate strategically. In the aftermath of the Syrian protests, Ankara is now cooperating closely with Washington and has become much more suspicious of Tehran. The International Crisis Group summarized the impact on Iran of Assad's fall as "possibly auguring a profound shift in the regional strategic balance of power—far more significant than a policy of sanctions or pressure against Tehran could possibly bring about."<sup>2</sup>

The encouraging geopolitical scene creates a better environment for the steps that Western governments can take to turn up the heat on Iran's nuclear program. Those steps can be grouped in four large baskets: sanctions, diplomacy, soft power, and harder measures.<sup>1</sup>

### Sanctions

Sanctions are not a way to shock and awe a targeted government. The nature of U.S. and international politics is that absent some blatant act of aggression such as Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, sanctions will inevitably be imposed gradually, not in one sudden blow. That incremental character can be turned into a strength by showing that time is on the side of those imposing the sanctions. Incremental increases in sanctions show Iran that without an accord the future will worsen continuously and stricter dual-use controls will slow the nuclear program.

Both alone and with its allies, the United States can and probably will send the message that the sanctions curve is always going up, and that extra measures are always in store to press Iran's economy harder and harder. Over the last few years, the U.S. government has shown that it is not "sanctioned out": a wide variety of additional measures have been tapped to inflict increasing pain on Tehran. And much more can be done. The UN expert panel

---

1. International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide, Middle East/North Africa*, Report No. 109, July 13, 2011, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf), p 27.

set up under Security Council Resolution 1929 recommended a variety of steps for improving enforcement of the sanctions against Iran. The European Union and the United States could do much to help newly industrializing countries enforce these sanctions, drawing on the experience of the “sanctions assistance missions” established by the EU to give teeth to sanctions against Serbia in the 1990s.

Iran is actively making the case for more sanctions by engaging in increasingly evasive measures that violate international norms and regulations in such areas as banking (disguising the beneficiaries and originators of transactions, contrary to rules against money laundering) and shipping (changing ships’ names at sea and turning off locator beacons to disguise their destinations, contrary to safety and insurance regulations). In turn, more and more Western countries are openly debating measures they had rejected just a few years ago. For example, Canada and Great Britain are considering banning all transactions with Iranian banks, including the Central Bank of Iran, and France is calling for an international ban on Iranian oil exports.

While it is true that Russian and Chinese anger over Western nations’ use of UN sanctions against Libya effectively precludes significant additional UN sanctions against Iran, but this situation need not prevent additional pressure from being applied to Iran. Indeed, success should be measured not by whether Iran is crippled but by whether a clear message is being sent that the longer the nuclear impasse goes on, the greater the pressure will be and the worse the problems Iran’s economy will face. An additional measure of the effectiveness of sanctions is the degree to which they slow Iran’s nuclear progress. To date, sanctions have impeded that progress by prompting a shortage of key materials. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports, as well as Iranian statements, indicate that Iran lacks the maraging steel necessary to make significant numbers of additional IR-1 centrifuges, which is why it has turned to carbon fiber for its new centrifuge designs—designs that Iran has been unable to perfect. In addition, Iran does not have enough filament-winding machines to form carbon fiber for both its missile and centrifuge programs.

Furthermore, Iran is unable to produce the maraging steel or filament-winding machines at home because it lacks access to the high-precision tools and devices it would need for manufacture.

Iran may be able to compensate for this lack of access through workarounds, but the regime appears to be settling for less-advanced technologies than it would want. Moreover, if one looks back several years at forecasts from respected think tanks, all projected that Iran’s enrichment program would be more advanced today than it actually is. From this picture, we discern a record of underestimating the barriers Iran faces, including those erected by the sanctions. Indeed, even Iran’s lack of trained scientists and engineers to work on the nuclear program may be attributed, in part, to the sanctions. The sanctions are making important progress on other fronts as well. As key Iranian trading partners like South Korea and the United Arab Emirates impose tough restrictions and enforcement measures, these states help convey the message that many in the international community take seriously the dangers associated with Iranian proliferation. When countries otherwise eager to promote trade accept the economic losses involved in forgoing business with a potentially lucrative partner such as Iran, they show concretely their disapproval of Iran’s actions. In this way, sanctions, constitute an important signaling mechanism—and deterrence requires unmistakable signaling.

Further, by enforcing sanctions, countries can demonstrate a willingness to take action—not just use tough words—to deter Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons. Indeed, tough words without tough action actually undermine deterrence. Rallying other nations to join in a sanctions effort is one way to enhance the credibility of deterrence pledges. Both the coalition itself and the effort Washington and its allies devote to building that coalition bolster the credibility of their statements aimed at deterring Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or using force under the cover of a perceived nuclear umbrella.

The sanctions serve a broader purpose beyond their impact on Iran. Many states might find the acquisition of nuclear weapons attractive if no

cost were associated with the process. But nuclear weapons capability looks less desirable when tied to debilitating sanctions that both depress economic growth and complicate diplomacy. The more impact the sanctions have on Iran's economy and its nuclear program, the stronger the argument that Iran's nuclear program has incurred a heavy cost for little advantage. After twenty years, Iran is still not nuclear capable, much less in possession of a nuclear weapon, and it has paid quite a price in its relations with both Europe and the United States. In addition, the nuclear impasse has brought increased attention to Iran's other policies, such as its support for terrorism and its human rights abuses. In short, over and above any impact the sanctions have on Iran, those sanctions may be useful for forestalling imitation of Iran's approach by other countries.

To date, however, sanctions on Iran have had a serious problem: neither the United States nor its allies have demonstrated clearly to the Iranian authorities what benefits would proceed from ending the nuclear impasse. Moreover, coalition members do not necessarily agree about what Iran must do to move the process forward and get relief from sanctions. For one thing, the nuclear impasse is not the only reason for the sanctions on Iran. U.S. sanctions were imposed as much in response to Tehran's support for terrorism as for its nuclear program, and it is hard to see Iran ending its support for Hizballah or Hamas, or the United States changing its view that these are terrorist groups. Additionally, the EU, as well as the United States, has imposed sanctions on Iran for human rights abuses; easing sanctions would be quite a political challenge, especially for EU governments, so long as Iran's human rights record remains as poor as it likely will.

Then there is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's firm conviction that the West's real objective is the "soft overthrow" of the Islamic Republic's regime, with the nuclear impasse serving only as the excuse of the moment for this longstanding Western goal. On this point, it is hard to see how Western governments can dissuade Khamenei, given that his objections are more about Western "cultural invasion" than about specific Western government policies.

Washington cannot stop Hollywood from making films Iranians want to watch, even while Khamenei regards such cultural activities as profound subversion of the Islamic Republic and its values.

When it comes to delineating benefits for changed behavior by the Iranians, the United States and its allies face a real challenge in demonstrating that Tehran would get specific, concrete, short-term advantages from resolving the nuclear impasse. That challenge has been made all the greater by Tehran's reading of the Libyan experience. From their point of view, once Muammar Qadhafi agreed to give up his weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the West penetrated his country and then moved in for the kill, stirring up local opposition and backing it up with NATO strikes. If Qadhafi had kept his weapons program, they reason, he would still be in power. This nut—explaining benefits to the Iranians—is perhaps the most difficult to crack in the entire nuclear impasse.

Contrary to the impression held by some that sanctions have never diverted countries from nuclear proliferation, the cases of seven states in particular offer mixed results. In the 1970s, relatively modest unilateral U.S. sanctions on South Korea and Taiwan persuaded those countries to abandon nuclear proliferation. In the 1980s, Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa gave up their respective pursuits of nuclear weapons for reasons of their own, with sanctions having modest if any impact. Of these states, South Africa was arguably most affected by sanctions, with growing international isolation playing into the apartheid regime's self-dissolution. In the 1990s, Iraq stopped pursuing nuclear weapons primarily because of its military defeat, although sanctions debatably had an effect unappreciated at the time. In the 2000s, the squeezing of the Libyan economy, along with Qadhafi's conclusion that WMD would not bring Libya much advantage, ultimately led to the surrender of the nuclear program. Though each of these cases is unique, a common thread entails the need to persuade a government that the nuclear program brings only higher costs and less advantage. Making that case is an achievable objective with Iran.

## Diplomacy

The prospects for resolution of the problems with Iran by diplomacy are poor. If nothing else, Iran's fractious internal politics will undermine the ability of any politician in Tehran to win broad acceptance among his peers for a deal with the international community, no matter the content of the deal. But reaching an agreement with Tehran is only one reason—and by no means the most important objective—for U.S. diplomatic initiatives aimed at the Islamic Republic. Such initiatives touch on issues that extend beyond Iran itself. If, for example, U.S. actions regarding Iran can reinforce European and other allies' conviction that Washington is a responsible international actor, such an impact would be more important than any impact of diplomacy on Tehran. The primary objective of U.S. diplomacy toward Iran should be to persuade governments and peoples around the world that the West is being reasonable and Iran's regime is the impediment to resolving the nuclear impasse, thus advancing U.S. interests globally.

Of course, the United States should only put forward proposals that it would, in fact, like Iran to accept; hypocritical offers made in the hopes they will be rejected are dangerous, both because Tehran might then accept them and because observing countries will realize they are disingenuous. But the Obama administration has the tools to frame "acceptable" proposals, and it is very comfortable engaging with difficult regimes like that of the Islamic Republic despite the profound problems such a government poses for the United States, whether for U.S. geostrategic interests (Arab-Israeli peace and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan) or U.S. values (human rights and support for democratic forces).

Indeed, the Obama administration is said to have pushed its P5+1 partners for proposals on the nuclear issue that make some European governments uneasy, particularly the administration's proposal that the January 2011 Istanbul talks consider an expanded swap of Iranian-enriched uranium for fuel rods (for both the Tehran Research Reactor and the Bushehr power reactor). Yet Tehran's refusal to engage in official bilateral dialogue with

the Obama administration in itself has done much to undermine Iran's claim of U.S. unreasonability. Given Tehran's paralysis in the face of vicious internal infighting, Obama's repeated offers never stood much chance of being accepted in the first place. But those offers have served a vital U.S. interest: to show countries around the world that the United States makes every effort to reach out to others in order to resolve differences. Iran is nowhere near as important to U.S. interests as is America's global reputation as a responsible actor.

By continuing to be clearly and deeply interested in official bilateral talks—talks that the Islamic Republic so long claimed it wanted—and by pushing for P5+1 proposals that go further than what some other P5+1 governments might like, the United States may well create a broad international consensus behind the notion that it is Iran who is being unreasonable. On this front, the November 18 IAEA vote by Venezuela and South Africa, among others, to call on Iran to cooperate with the agency was heartening, despite these two states' many differences with the United States over nuclear policy. If Iran feels the heat from a wide array of countries, it is more likely to engage with the P5+1 on confidence-building measures. In other words, a good way to expand the zone of possible agreement with Iran is to appear more reasonable than the regime, thereby isolating Tehran. That said, at this point, the key strategic objective of diplomacy toward Iran remains to persuade the world that the United States is a responsible actor—not to get Iran to move.

Ordinarily, the UN Security Council would be the single most important venue for the effort to forge broad international consensus on the Iranian nuclear issue, or any other such issue. But this approach seems impractical for 2012. Already, Russia has reacted strongly to what it sees as Western twisting of Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya, which the Russians never expected to serve as the basis for a NATO mission that ultimately precipitated Qadhafi's overthrow. And it seems unlikely that the Russian government will be much more cooperative during the lead-up to its own March 2012 presidential elections. Russian

policymakers appear to be trying to anticipate what Vladimir Putin's policies will be once he returns to the presidency—and they seem to be wagering that the hardest-line stance toward the West will be the ticket to retaining power once the Putin restoration is complete. Despite unlikely cooperation in the near term, the Russians may be more willing to cooperate further down the road, since Moscow seems to genuinely share the West's view that Iran should not acquire nuclear weapons—though it differs from the West on how to achieve that objective.

As for China, Beijing does not seem to care much about nuclear proliferation by North Korea, much less Iran. If China agrees to stand aside, presumably it will do so only because it does not want to be the dealbreaker on an agreement made by the other great powers. In an encouraging development, China seems increasingly to have decided on Saudi Arabia rather than Iran as its prime energy partner in the region, which suggests that Beijing's energy concerns will not lead it to protect Iran.

Given the impasse at the Security Council, the United States and its allies will have to construct as broad a consensus as they can outside the UN. The signs in this area are good. EU governments are appalled by Iran's outrageous human rights record. Among the G-8, the Canadian government is taking perhaps the hardest line on Iran. Several Pacific countries, including South Korea, Japan and Australia, have been quite cooperative. Regionally, the Turkish government—as noted earlier—has become disillusioned with Iran primarily due to developments in Syria, while the unrest in Bahrain and the allegations about an Iranian plot against the Saudi ambassador in Washington have led to an uncharacteristically vocal stance against Iran by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

### **Soft Power**

Vigorous condemnation of Iranian human rights abuses serves multiple U.S. interests: pressuring Tehran more forcefully, promoting international understanding of Iran's ruling regime, lending moral support to Iranian democrats, and upholding U.S. values. The last year has seen a string of successes at international forums in highlighting Iranian

human rights abuses, including through the creation of a UN human rights special rapporteur, and resolutions at the General Assembly's human rights committee and the UN Human Rights Council. U.S. partners, especially Canada and the EU countries, have often played a leading role in denouncing Iranian human rights violations, including through sanctions targeting individual human rights abusers. This area holds many opportunities, given Iran's miserable track record on women's rights, labor rights, rights for religious groups, press freedoms, rule of law, and so on.

During 2009–2010, hopes were high that the Green Movement could shake the foundations of the Islamic Republic. Those hopes have been dashed. Yet from this experience, we should not derive the lesson that resistance is futile but rather that the regime periodically faces mass popular resistance, whether in the student-sparked protests of 1999, the ongoing women's movement, or the Greens. The experience of recent decades shows that civil resistance movements can succeed against brutal dictatorships at the right moment, if they are creative and draw strength from their roots in the people. That means these movements are primarily self-reliant; the role of outsiders is modest. But outsiders have made a contribution to many such movements, particularly by helping civil society, first, to achieve better communication both internally and with the broader public, and, second, to learn from the experiences of successful civil resistance movements in other countries. These are areas in which the U.S. government can help Iranian democratic forces. As elsewhere, such assistance is much more effective if done covertly.

Facilitating communication means breaking through the “electronic curtain” that has closed off Iran as effectively as the Iron Curtain closed off Eastern Europe in the heyday of Soviet hegemony. The most important means of getting news to Iranians is and will remain satellite television, on which more Iranians rely than on internet access. Commercial stations like the popular Manoto and Farsi-1 provide entertainment, some of which conveys very useful social messages on issues such as tolerance, openness, and respect for the opinions of

others. Directly political news and entertainment (e.g., political satire) will always come from stations supported by foreign governments. BBC does well in this regard; unfortunately, Voice of America's (VOA's) Persian News Network lags sadly behind. The U.S. government can learn much from the successful U.S. experience with public broadcasting through outlets such as National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System. What works best is independent government-supported organizations, not government sources like VOA.

By contrast to the central role of satellite television in communicating to Iranians, cell phones and internet take center state in communication between Iranians. The internet is potentially more powerful for reaching a large audience, but the regime's vigorous cyberpolicing has dramatically reduced the internet's utility for political discussions. This makes all the more important the circumvention technology being explored by the U.S. government. In this discussion, cell phones and instant-messaging services may be at least as important as the internet. For instance, the short-distance person-to-person broadcasting allowed by Bluetooth devices has become a highly popular way for Iranians to communicate without government interference. The U.S. government should work with a wide array of companies to improve access to appropriate technologies in Iran. That includes reaching out to software firms and hardware providers to find ways for appropriate communications technology to reach the Iranian people despite U.S. sanctions on Iran.

If communications is the first area in which the U.S. government has been making a difference—and can do more—sharing common experiences from other civil resisters is the second such area. The Iranian civil resistance was not particularly creative or skillful during the 2009–2010 street protest campaign. Iranian democrats need to learn from others how to self-organize and to create a civic base, not only in Tehran but across the country. They could benefit greatly from the opportunity to meet resisters with shared experiences from countries such as Egypt, Burma, Zimbabwe, and

Serbia. Individuals who have organized against a brutal dictatorship bring credibility and practicality that Americans and Europeans lack. Such meet-ups have occurred in several other contexts, brokered by U.S. and European governments, and they could now be held in a number of countries and settings to which Iranian democrats could gain access with relative ease, such as Malaysia or Turkey – apparently the only two countries to which Iranians can travel without a visa. Though, of course, a danger will always be posed by regime reaction against participants.

Outside supporters of civil resistance should learn from their past mistakes in other cases. In particular, there is little to be gained and much to be lost from focusing on unifying the opposition and working with one or two charismatic leaders. Civil resistance starts with civil society, and then political organizations; leaders come at the end. The U.S. government should be ready to pour resources into any entity ready to make use of them, without worrying about the unity of the opposition. Depending on one person is an invitation to the regime to decapitate the movement by imprisoning that person.

The U.S. government should not declare its support for a regime's overthrow unless the moment comes when there is a reasonable prospect that the regime may fall. At present in Iran, there is no clear theory of weakness—no narrative of how the regime can be made to collapse. So, the moment is not ripe to talk of regime change. The goal now should be boosting organizing around local issues to achieve small victories that give people confidence, as well as encouraging divisions among the ruling elite. A moment may come when the situation changes quickly. As presaged in the experience of other brutal dictatorships, the rulers eventually make bad mistakes.

The Iranian opposition has been daunted by the challenge of confronting the determined resistance of a regime that retains strong support among some elements of the population. Nonviolence is often more effective than armed opposition because the barriers to participation—both moral and

physical—are much lower, allowing children, the elderly, and those who are not completely dedicated to participate. When people participate in such high numbers, especially when joined by luminaries from all disciplines, the regime's use of violence is more likely to backfire. This was Iran's experience in the 1970s: several armed attempts to topple the shah failed, but the civil disobedience of 1978–1979 did the job.

### Harder Measures

Too much of the discussion of harder measures potentially aimed at the Iranian nuclear program assumes a black-or-white scenario: a massive air campaign or nothing at all. In fact, harder measures come in a wide spectrum of grays. For some years, the dark gray covert action of spurring defections and engaging in sabotage, cyber warfare, and targeted killings has been used to slow Iran's nuclear program. Much use has also been made of the lighter grays, such as a robust force posture and arms sales to regional states. And more can be done, such as the enactment of more assertive military exercises and military cooperation.

Covert action against Iran's nuclear program has been under way on many fronts for years. The U.S. government has acknowledged that it secured the defection of an important Iranian nuclear scientist, and the Iranian government has alleged a U.S. hand behind the disappearance of a brigadier general from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In addition, Iran's December 2011 downing of a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) revealed a vigorous U.S. covert intelligence collection effort. Many press reports, not denied by Washington, state that the Swiss government inadvertently stumbled on a U.S. program to supply Iran with sabotaged parts for its nuclear program. The Israelis, too, appear to be conducting an active military disruption campaign against Iran's nuclear program, including the assassination of several Iranian nuclear scientists as alleged by Tehran. The Iranian government has acknowledged as well that its nuclear program was affected by the Stuxnet computer virus, which

many computer security specialists argue must have been produced by a government, with fingers usually pointed to Israel.

Low-profile actions can be excellent tools, and they have a lower political price than large-scale bombing. The defections, UAV overflights, acts of sabotage and cyber warfare, and assassinations have all reinforced the impact of sanctions on Iran's nuclear program. Iranian nuclear engineers have to worry about being killed on their way to work, about their colleagues leaking information to the West, about their computers not working, about their equipment malfunctioning, about lacking necessary materials, about unavailability of training and advice, and about the possibility of strikes from UAVs. That list of problems is daunting. No wonder Iran has been unable to perfect the new centrifuge design it has been working on for years. Given this climate, how attractive could a job in the nuclear program appear to bright young Iranians finishing their education? Finally, not only are low-profile actions effective, but they are less likely to stir up Iranian nationalist "rally around the flag" reactions and less likely to create sympathy for Iran as a nation under siege from the United States and its allies.

In recent years, the United States has become more active in low-profile aggressive actions not only in Iran but also in other theaters. Examples include drone targeted-killing campaigns against al-Qaeda in Pakistan/Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen. And the United States recently acknowledged that it is developing offensive cyber capabilities. Calling such capabilities the twenty-first-century form of war represents only somewhat of an exaggeration, in contrast to the large bombing campaigns of the twentieth century. The more progress Iran appears to be making on its nuclear program, the more appropriate it would be to consider use of more aggressive techniques against Iran. These techniques might include sharing more information with Israel, which appears to have an active cyber warfare and targeted-killing campaign against Iran's nuclear program. Also appropriate might be equipping the UAVs flying over Iran with strike capabilities, a step that could raise anxiety for

the Revolutionary Guard, who could worry during missile tests that UAVs may ignite the highly explosive fuel.

As for the lighter-gray hard measures, much has been done to reinforce regional friends and show U.S. readiness in the event of a confrontation between Iran and regional states, but some challenges lie ahead as U.S. forces wind down their missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even so, U.S. forces will remain in many countries near Iran, giving the U.S. military the capability to quickly and vigorously respond to any Iranian aggression. One way to draw Tehran's attention to the U.S. capabilities on its borders would be to intensify exercises near Iran, possibly including unilateral U.S. actions such as "freedom of navigation" exercises near Iranian waters. In addition, even more vigorous intelligence-collection efforts could be made inside Iran (through not only UAVs but also Special Forces actions). Both freedom of navigation exercises and greater intelligence collection within Iran entail a degree of risk.

Larger and more frequent exercises with regional states could be aimed more explicitly at potential threats from Iran—something certain regional states seem more prepared to consider than in years past. Ideally, such exercises would be multilateral, but the rivalries and suspicions among regional states make such a prospect less likely than bilateral exercises.

As useful as intensified exercises with the GCC states would be, the most important regional cooperation for the United States will be with Israel. Washington has a strong interest in ensuring that Israel is confident in its capability to respond to the growing Iranian nuclear threat. If Israel worries that it is losing this capability, then Jerusalem may be compelled to act while it can, whereas Washington may prefer to wait as pressure on Tehran builds. To reduce the risk of Israeli action that is premature from a U.S. perspective, the United States needs to speak frankly with Israel about what it requires to be confident that it can act against Iran's nuclear program if compelled to do so. Presumably, Israeli needs will include accurate and detailed intelligence, means to defeat Iranian defenses, and the

capabilities to inflict devastating damage on the Iranian program. By providing Israel with more robust capabilities in all those domains, the United States can affect the Israeli debate about whether to strike Iran's nuclear program.

An area of military cooperation that has worried and angered Iran in particular has been increasing U.S.-Turkish cooperation on missile defense. Such cooperation offers a way to counter Iran's long-range missile threat to Europe—and possibly beyond, in light of (quickly retracted) reports from Iran that the November 7 explosion at a Revolutionary Guard base occurred during testing of components of an intercontinental missile. Arguably as important, Turkey's participation in measures to defend against Iranian threats suggests that Ankara is becoming less sanguine about Iran's intentions. In the context of sharply divergent Turkish and Iranian approaches to the unrest in Syria, Ankara seems to be reevaluating its attitude toward Tehran's foreign policy. Anything that can be done to drive the wedge deeper between Turkey and Iran would be an especially useful part of the campaign to isolate Iran until the nuclear impasse is resolved.

Another light-gray form of harder measures involves putting the screws to Iranian terrorism, whether that terrorism is conducted directly or through proxies. An example of effective action in this area was the handling of the alleged Iranian plot against the Saudi ambassador to Washington. In a joint U.S.-Saudi effort assisted by other U.S. friends, an active diplomatic campaign that included the release of extensive information led to a 106–9 vote in the UN General Assembly on a resolution that explicitly cited Iran.<sup>2</sup> Iran sent a senior official to campaign against this vote, a sign of how much Iran dislikes condemnation from a broad international coalition. This case offers lessons for

---

2. Resolution 6613 "deplores the plot to assassinate the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States" and "calls upon the Islamic Republic of Iran to comply with all its international obligations under international law,...particularly with respect to its obligation to provide law enforcement assistance, and to cooperate with States seeking to bring to justice all those who participated in the planning, sponsoring, organization, and attempted execution of the plot to assassinate the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

further action in the likely event that Iran does not follow the General Assembly's call to cooperate in the investigation into the attempted killing.

Strategic communications represent an underappreciated capability of the U.S. military, as compared with the U.S. government, which is not always the most adroit at delivering its message to local peoples. Only in recent years has the U.S. military bolstered this capability, and it should be used to the maximum. While some in the State Department may think that with sufficient mandate and resources their department could do a better job than the military at strategic communications, the reality is that for the foreseeable future, the U.S. military is going to be better resourced and given a broader mandate than any other agency engaging in strategic communications.

Yet another gray-area hard measure could involve a more assertive declaratory policy—e.g., a formal presidential finding endorsed by Congress stating that any nation in the region that uses a nuclear weapon against a U.S. ally in the region will be considered to be attacking the United States. Use of such a measure could be tricky, however, posing two serious problems. First, a statement of this nature would suggest to Iran, and to U.S. friends, that the United States is accepting a nuclear Iran, contrary to years of U.S. statements that Iran cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. Second, the statement would not be particularly credible. Why should regional states believe the United States would deter a nuclear Iran when it has not deterred a non-nuclear Iran? Why, if the United States backs down from its longstanding avowal about what would be unacceptable, should one believe the United States is really and truly serious this time?

During the Cold War, declaratory policy was generally taken seriously when followed up by muscular actions. What actions would the United States take in this case? Rather than an assertive declaratory policy unaccompanied by strong actions, a better approach would be what President Theodore Roosevelt called “a homely adage”—namely, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

## **Do We Have Time?**

It is hard to escape the impression that Iran thinks time is on its side: its nuclear program is proceeding, and the sanctions can be endured. Optimists can always argue that as more and more sanctions are imposed, their impact will eventually lead Iranian leaders to concede. After all, Iran did agree, in both 2003 and 2004, to suspend enrichment. And the Islamic Republic has in the past made more painful decisions than abandoning the nuclear program: particularly, it ended the war with Iraq despite more than a hundred thousand dead. The record suggests that Iran does not respond to pressure; it only responds to great pressure. But even the greatest optimists acknowledge that this pressure will work only over time. Do we have that time, or will Iran develop nuclear weapons in the interim?

Some comfort can be taken in the November 2011 IAEA report, which shows that the nuclear weapons program is more of a scattered effort than the concerted campaign Iran was conducting through 2003. Since then, the weapons program has been deferred though not halted. Iran's strategy seems to be to move every piece forward to the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability—the enrichment piece, the missile delivery piece, and so on. This approach is consistent with the view that Iran is not North Korea: it is not making a mad dash to a primitive nuclear device just to “create facts.” Consider that the most dangerous situation for Iran would be to build and test one nuclear device. This would be a way of saying, “We are dangerous—and unarmed.” Correspondingly, the confidence of senior U.S. officials that rather than dashing for one primitive nuclear device, Iran is more likely to wait until it can build quite a few nuclear warheads for missiles, appears to have considerable basis. That confidence underlies the view that the United States and its partners have time, even though Iran has the technical capacity to make a single nuclear device within a matter of months.

Furthermore, senior U.S. officials are confident that Iran would run grave risks if it tried to either “sneak out” or “break out”: Tehran's record at hiding clandestine facilities is poor, and any move to enrich

uranium to weapons grade at the known facilities would be detected within weeks. In either case, these same U.S. officials are confident that the current inhibitions against the use of military force against Iran would evaporate. In turn, they believe Iranian leaders worry about the grave risks they would run if they were caught openly building nuclear weapons. Of course, Iran may have more opportunities than the optimists think to quickly acquire weapons—for example, through using North Korean facilities and capabilities. And Iranian leaders may be greater gamblers and more ignorant about possible Western reaction than the optimists seem to assume. The closer Iran gets to having the capability to build a number of missile warheads in short order, the more important it will be to reinforce Western abilities to detect Iranian sneak-out—alone or with North Korean assistance—and to convey more bluntly to Iran’s leaders a firm resolve to use military force to prevent a breakout.

For now, some time remains. True, the prospects for a grand bargain between Iran and the West are weak, but—as mentioned—such a bargain is not and should not be the goal of U.S. policy. Each side is profoundly skeptical about the other’s trustworthiness. And the Iranian leadership is so divided that it is not clear Tehran would follow through on any agreement reached with the West. Moreover, Iran’s leaders are convinced that the West’s real goal is regime change, with the nuclear issue being just the excuse of the moment. This is why the appropriate goal is to delay Iran’s nuclear progress while implementing confidence-building measures—that is, small steps demonstrating each side’s seriousness. The achievable objective, over time, is getting Iran to see that realizing its nuclear goals any time soon is unlikely and that it can get benefits from the West for ending the nuclear impasse. Success is by no means guaranteed, but giving up prematurely would be inappropriate.

There is no magic bullet that will resolve the nuclear impasse with Iran—no single diplomatic, military, or sanctions measure that will be decisive. But the cumulative impact of intensifying measures on every front may have a twin benefit: raising the costs to Iran of continuing on its current path and

showing Iran’s leaders the futility of their nuclear efforts. Iran has been pursuing nuclear enrichment for more than twenty years, and the results of all that effort are not impressive, paired with massive costs. At some point, Tehran may seek a way out. The pattern of the Islamic Republic has been to stubbornly refuse to budge until making a dramatic shift in policy, as illustrated by the sudden, unilateral end to the war with Iraq after its continuation for years and with none of Iran’s war aims accomplished. If that same pattern holds for the nuclear program, Iran may some day shift course sharply, doing on its own far more than had been asked for in negotiations.

To be sure, the Islamic Republic seems unlikely to abandon the objective of eventually attaining a nuclear weapons capability. But Tehran may agree to a tactical adjustment that could have a strategic consequence. Postponing the nuclear program may look like only a delay, but a delay could be a victory because the Islamic Republic may not last forever. As noted before, Khamenei, who presumably knows something about Iran’s politics, is preoccupied by the threat of Western cultural invasion and the possibility of a “soft overthrow.” His regime looks a lot like the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev: it no longer rules on the basis of an idea and, therefore, is becoming increasingly hollow and corroded. That does not mean the end is near, but it does mean the current system may not be sustainable. In the late 1940s, U.S. diplomat George Kennan advocated containment of the Soviet Union because he thought its system could not last. It certainly seems that the Islamic Republic has not won the hearts and minds of Iran’s rising generation, which is not a good sign for its future.

In short, the United States and its partners have time, both tactically and strategically. Tactically, Iran’s nuclear program is not yet mature. And strategically, the Islamic Republic is not a sustainable system. It is not inevitable that the Islamic Republic of Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. Using a vigorous combination of sanctions, diplomacy, soft power, and harder measures offers good prospects that Iran can be deflected from its current nuclear path.



**Patrick Clawson** is director of research at The Washington Institute, where he heads the Iran Security Initiative. Widely consulted as an analyst and media commentator, he has authored more than 150 articles about the Middle East and international economics as well as eighteen books or studies on Iran. Dr. Clawson appears frequently on television and radio, and has published op-eds in major media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*.

