

James F. Jeffrey



MOVING TO **DECISION**
U.S. POLICY
TOWARD
IRAN

A WASHINGTON INSTITUTE STRATEGIC REPORT

James F. Jeffrey

MOVING TO
DECISION

U.S. POLICY
TOWARD
IRAN



STRATEGIC REPORT 10 | FEBRUARY 2013

THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE
CHARLES AND LYNN SCHUSTERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION
FOR ITS GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

© 2013 by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050
Washington, DC 20036

Design: 1000colors.org

Cover: “Rustam Kills the Turanian Hero Alkus with His Lance,” detail from the *Shahnameh*, an 11th century Persian epic poem.

CONTENTS

THE AUTHOR | V

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | VII

INTRODUCTION | 1

1. THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN THE U.S.-IRAN CONFLICT | 3

2. THE ENDURING CONFLICT | 11

3. ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT IMPASSE | 14

4. POLICY OPTIONS | 36

5. CONCLUSION | 43

MAP: 2009 IRAN COUNTRY PROFILE (CIA) | VI

THE AUTHOR

AMBASSADOR JAMES F. JEFFREY is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on U.S. strategies to counter Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the broader Middle East. One of the nation's most respected diplomats, Ambassador Jeffrey has held a series of highly sensitive posts in Washington and abroad. In addition to his service in Ankara and Baghdad, he served as assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration, with a special focus on Iran. He served previously as principal deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State, where his responsibilities included leading the Iran policy team and coordinating public diplomacy. Earlier appointments included service as senior advisor on Iraq to the secretary of state; chargé d'affaires and deputy chief of mission in Baghdad; deputy chief of mission in Ankara; and ambassador in Albania.



2009 Iran Country Profile (Source: Central Intelligence Agency)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JOB ONE ON THE INTERNATIONAL FRONT for the second-term Obama administration is undoubtedly Iran. The threat of Iran going nuclear within eighteen months—combined with a firm U.S. (and Israeli) policy to prevent such an outcome, if necessary, by force, the intensive U.S.-led international campaign being waged against Iran, the real risk of a bloody clash between U.S. and Iranian forces in the Gulf, and the corresponding threats to oil markets and the global economy—makes the problem truly exceptional. Not only is the standoff preeminent in U.S. discussions, it is also the most significant, high-visibility, and dangerous event anywhere in the world today.

This report provides policy recommendations for consideration as the United States grapples with this crucial issue in the weeks ahead. In doing so, it examines the roots of the conflict, summarizes its history, and reviews key elements at play in the bilateral relationship. The report's most important conclusion is that, even as the urgency for the West to act has been fueled by Iran's quest for a nuclear weapons capability, the underlying problem remains Iran's drive for regional hegemony and theological dominance, a drive that has ensnared the United States in a struggle since 1979. America's own global foreign policy goals, especially nonproliferation and regional stability, are challenged by Iran's hegemonic drive. Recognizing this challenge is the first step in developing sound policy; in this context, the nuclear issue is but one, albeit a uniquely dangerous, element of Iran's threat to regional security, a threat that the United States must confront. The second step for U.S. leaders is to recognize that America's management of this issue will have a profound impact on its global leadership. And America must lead. Alternative managers on the issue simply don't make sense, given the scale of the threat posed by Iran, the absolute nature of Iran's security interests, the brashness of its challenge to international norms, and the weakness of regional forces.

Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, or at least an acknowledged capability to produce or deploy them, understandably dominates its confrontation with the international community. In response, the United States has developed impressive *de facto* and *de jure* alliances (with the Gulf states, Israel, NATO, the European Union, and the UN Security Council) to deploy anti-missile defenses, pursue nuclear negotiations with Iran, condemn the pro-

gram internationally through UN mechanisms, and punish Iran through economic, financial, oil, and military sanctions. As of fall 2012, the impact of the sanctions has been significant: Iranian oil exports are down by an estimated 40 percent, and earnings have fallen by an almost equal amount, while the Iranian currency plummets. Iran, of course, can deploy its own military, terrorist, economic, and political levers in the region and globally, relying on its allies Syria and Hizballah (besieged though they are now), exercising influence on Iraq and Afghanistan, and drawing verbal sustenance from the Non-aligned Movement. Given these Iranian counters, and the inherent limits to the effectiveness of the economic and diplomatic campaign being imposed by the West, there is no guarantee that Iran's suffering will be great enough to alter its intention to pursue nuclear weapons. Nor does turning to the Iranian people offer much hope. After the violent putdown of the Iranian popular uprising in 2009–2010, the role of the Iranian population in any confrontation with, or longer-term containment of, Iran is difficult to ascertain. A 2011 Rand Corporation poll of Iranians noted that while almost 50 percent strongly oppose seeking nuclear weapons, more than 30 percent strongly support the move. Almost 90 percent of those polled backed establishing civilian nuclear energy. As for whether to open relations with the United States, the poll revealed about an even split.

Finally, both Israel and the United States have declared their unequivocal willingness to use force against Iran's nuclear program to prevent a nuclear weapon. Absent a negotiated deal, the best course of action for the United States, and for regional security, would be to wield this threat, along with other pressure, to delay Iran's move to nuclear capability or a nuclear weapons breakout. But in the end, this set of actions may not be successful. Altogether, U.S. efforts, ranging from sanctions to the deterrent threat of military action, cannot directly produce an ideological change of heart for the Iranians or cessation of their nuclear program, a reality at the center of Israeli concerns. At best, these actions can pressure Iran to slow down its nuclear program, pay an increasingly high price economically and diplomatically, or risk a military engagement with unknown consequences.

In the framework of the current approach, the United States can either aim for better results through negotiations or ramp up the pressure. Concerning the first option, Dennis Ross, former advisor to four presidents, has argued that only a "big for big" approach, rather than "little for little" measures aimed at building confidence, can help move the United States toward its goals. In such a scenario, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council

and Germany (P5+1) would lay out a far-reaching compromise offer. Various experts, most recently former national security advisor Stephen Hadley in his “Option Two” framework,¹ have sketched out such an offer. As detailed by Hadley, Iran would have to agree to

- cease enrichment beyond 3.5 percent;
- ship anything enriched beyond 3.5 percent out of the country, as well as most of its 3.5 percent stockpile;
- curtail expansion of the Fordow enrichment plant;
- allow intrusive inspections by the IAEA to verify compliance with all of the above.

In return, the United States and international community would

- supply fuel and medical isotopes for Iran’s medical research reactor;
- provide spare parts for civilian aircraft;
- forgo any further sanctions and gradually lift those already in place as Iran’s compliance with the agreement was demonstrated.

In terms of pressuring Iran, little new can be done, apart from making more credible the Obama administration’s strike option to prevent a nuclear weapon. The desire here to avoid articulating a redline is understandable. No country wants to tie its hands on a life-or-death issue. But the U.S. position still carries a major problem: the perception that the window between actionable, high-probability intelligence of an impending Iranian nuclear weapon and the actual acquisition or deployment of such a weapon will be too brief for U.S. action. The administration thus should consider credibility-enhancing steps short of setting a redline or deadline, including a declaration that the president’s warning could include automatic military action upon the announcement of, or intelligence indicating, the existence of a nuclear weapon. A second step for the United States would be to plan for and signal that once it is on the threshold of possible military action, it will deploy various military and diplomatic gestures to show its seriousness while also attempting to convince the Iranians not to proceed any further.

But planners of any military option must consider the nature and purpose of the military action and the Iranian response. First, various analysts believe that nothing short of a ground invasion can guarantee the end of the Iranian program, and that extended military strikes by the United States alone or in concert with Israel could, at best, set back Iran’s nuclear program

for up to four years. Given this reality, policymakers must calculate carefully the associated costs and benefits of military action, given Iran's range of possible responses. Such responses likely would include various conventional and unconventional or terrorist actions, along with booting IAEA agents from the country, extricating itself from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and pursuing an entirely clandestine nuclear program. From the U.S. standpoint, a conventional military engagement is not a desirable course of action. The Iranians are prepared to fight "asymmetrically," drawing on the lessons of the Tanker War (between Iran, Gulf States, the UN and the United States 1986-88), using small boats, mines, submarines, shore-based antishipping missiles, longer-range ballistic missile strikes, and terrorist actions to inflict losses, gain prestige, intimidate U.S. allies, push American forces onto the defensive, and demonstrate resolve, even in the face of its own serious losses. Some Iranians might even welcome a conflict in which they did not, in a traditional sense, win. With or without "winning," Iran's possible use of terrorist operations, and missiles and other systems that threaten the infrastructure of Gulf countries by way of the Strait of Hormuz, is immensely worrying.

Given the costs and the less-than-stellar guaranteed results of a military campaign, not everyone believes that the United States should make "prevention" a priority. Nevertheless, containing a nuclear-armed Iran, given the violence, volatility, and instability of the region, would be a very hard job. Furthermore, while the American people are not particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of the United States bombing Iran, both President Obama and his now-vanquished opponent, Mitt Romney, locked themselves into a position backing "prevention, if necessary by force."

The United States is thus at a decision point. Even as the present set of pressures on Iran is both "professionally" applied and punishing, it guarantees nothing beyond a considerable weakening of Iran's capabilities, if not its intentions. The scene would change little even if buoyed by a better negotiation offer or stiffened by tougher threats. And the alternatives are not much more appealing. A major military campaign to occupy the country is possible but not practical, given the extraordinary cost, state of the U.S. economy, and public disenchantment with the Middle East war. As for Iran's internal politics, no indications suggest the country is ready for fundamental regime change or abandonment of its basic objectionable policies. Nor is there any sign on the horizon, after thirty years of effort, of a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement to ease the underlying bilateral conflict.

In view of these realities, the United States must be prepared to maintain an indefinite confrontation against Iran, if Washington wishes to carry out in the Middle East its global strategy of moderating regional instability and countering regional hegemony. Such confrontation could (repeat: could) force Iran to modify its threatening behaviors, particularly if the price is savage enough that Iranian leaders perceive their regime's existence is under threat. But the United States cannot count on that outcome, and thus should be prepared to hold fast for the long haul. Military action against Iran can be an element of this strategy, if carefully orchestrated to minimize—or, on the other hand, dominate—escalation, but it likely could not fully destroy Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure, nor force the regime to abandon its hegemonic policies. While a military option has its drawbacks, the damage it inflicts could eventually produce a more moderate Iran, or at least weaken its intent and capability to challenge the United States and its allies.

This report concludes with the following key recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- ▶ **Confront Iran's hegemonic drive and deter or resist any Iranian efforts to achieve a nuclear weapons "breakout."** While this policy might have to be sustained over the long term, it should be sufficiently threatening to the Iranian regime to encourage a change in behavior. Tough sanctions, a credible preventive military option, a strong regional alliance and military posture, and rollback of specific Iranian challenges, especially military challenges, could provide the appropriate level of threat.

In applying the following elements to this confront-and-resist strategy, ensure that they are prioritized and fully coordinated daily by National Security Council staff to guarantee unity of effort.

- ▶ **Prevent Iran's possession of nuclear weapons.** In addition to other diplomatic, economic, and military measures, deploy the most far-reaching nuclear compromise feasible, while making clear that Iran's failure to accept such a deal will be interpreted as a decision by the regime to press for nuclear weapons.

Maintain the U.S. prevention strategy, without establishing a specific public redline, but think through the thresholds that would trigger a shift toward last-ditch diplomatic efforts and then military action. To increase international confidence in prevention, make clear that any incontrovertible evidence that Iran has a nuclear weapon(s) would result in devastating U.S. strikes—that is, attaining a nuclear weapon would not deter, but

rather trigger, U.S. action. Spell out with partners the likely threshold for last-ditch diplomatic and operational actions before a strike.

- ▶ **Strengthen U.S. and allied conventional military capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat any Iranian military action in the region.** Reserve the right to respond overwhelmingly and asymmetrically to Iran. The United States must win convincingly in any resort to force.

Thus, maintaining an American presence in the region sufficient to deter or win a conflict with Iran should be the number-one U.S. defense priority. A failure of the United States to maintain stability and support allies in the Middle East will have profound negative effects on parallel U.S. security goals in east Asia and elsewhere. Be particularly watchful for Iranian cyber threats.

- ▶ **Continuously strengthen formal and informal alliances,** which constitute one of America's strongest cards in confronting Iran. To preserve these alliances, the United States should distinguish between Iranian actions it finds objectionable and those it will oppose to the point of sanctions and military action. Take risks to drive the regime of Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria, support Iraq, and prevent a Sunni-Shiite civil war across the region.
- ▶ **Keep the economic pressure on Iran,** targeting hydrocarbons trade, financial institutions, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps entities.
- ▶ **Reach out to the Iranian population,** making clear American respect for both the Iranian people and Iran as a sovereign state, and advocate democracy.

NOTES

1. Stephen J. Hadley, "Eight Ways to Deal with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/26/eight_ways_to_deal_with_iran?page=0,2.

MOVING TO
DECISION

U.S. POLICY
TOWARD
IRAN

INTRODUCTION

IN REGARD TO THE WORLD OF 2013, the U.S. administration sees no problem that combines the risks, the diplomatic and economic stakes, and the urgency of that posed by Iran. Absent decisive American action, the possibility of tragedy looms. While various experts, most recently Henry Kissinger, have come to a similar conclusion,¹ it is not clear whether this is fully grasped by the Obama administration and the American public.

This paper begins with a summary of Iranian foreign policy views and examines the underlying hegemonic impulses informing those views. It then looks at U.S. policy, noting how its components that directly challenge Iran's regional aspirations line up with international goals set by American foreign policy since World War II. Diametrically opposed worldviews and core interests, therefore, rather than any discrete misunderstanding between Iran and the United States, can be seen to explain the present conflict between the two countries.

Chapter 2 recounts the last thirty-plus years of conflict, underlining the inability of either side to score a "knockout blow."

The scope of the third chapter is a run-through of elements affecting the relationship, beginning with the critical nuclear issue. Here Iran does seek a strategic breakthrough, and the United States understandably is putting much effort into blocking it. Also discussed are relevant diplomatic, economic, conventional military, and domestic developments in both Iran and America.

Chapter 4 reexamines the basic tenets of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran, concluding that they are valid but very difficult to carry out. It then inventories possibilities for a U.S. knockout blow and determines that neither massive military action, regime change, nor political engagement is likely to end Iran's challenge; thus, one or another effort to confront Iran's adventurism will have to be maintained over the long term. This need to confront Iran will entail responding to the regime's offensive gambits and, in order to effect significant change, pushing Iran's leaders to the point of fearing for their regime's survival.

1. Henry A. Kissinger, "Iran Must Be President Obama's Immediate Priority," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-iran-must-be-president-obamas-immediate-priority/2012/11/16/2edf93e4-2dea-11e2-beb2-4b4cf5087636_story.html.

Chapter 5 offers conclusions concerning the nature of the bilateral conflict, and specific recommendations on enacting a confront-and-resist approach, which can be seen as a strategy of containment-plus.

CHAPTER 1

THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN THE U.S.-IRAN CONFLICT

U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS and Iran analysts agree to a significant extent over Iran's expansive approach to the region, as reflected in its actions. The Pentagon's "Annual Report on Military Power of Iran," published in April 2012, states boldly, "Iran's grand strategy remains challenging U.S. influence while developing its domestic capabilities to become the dominant power in the Middle East."¹ A key U.S. military leader formerly in the region, then-Fifth Fleet commander Adm. Kevin J. Cosgriff, notes: "Iran believes that its revolutionary ideology takes precedence over international norms. . . . Tehran cannot abide the U.S. role in the region, which it believes is its main obstacle to its hegemonic aspirations."² Other analysts have reached similar conclusions, noting Iran's goals of countering U.S. influence, dominating the region, and promoting the Islamic revolution. These views draw upon Iranian ideology, actions, and statements by important Iranian figures.

BASIC TENETS OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Iran's official foreign policy doctrine offers the following language for anyone seeking to better understand the regime's worldview: It is based on the

negation of exercising or accepting any form of domination whatsoever, safeguarding all-embracing independence and territorial integrity, defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with domineering powers, and peaceful and reciprocal relations with non-belligerent States. It shall be prohibited to conclude any treaty or agreement whatsoever that will result in the alien domination over the natural and economic resources...while Iran will refrain completely from any interference in the internal matters of other nations.³

While sounding fairly innocuous, this official party line reflects an underlying hostile approach to the current world order. As a striving regional hegemon, Iran holds itself in considerably high esteem, seeing itself as both a trendsetter and protector of the Islamic Middle East and as the leading force of opposition to the United States and the Western world; in essence, the Islamic Republic views itself as a more positive representation of a "head of the snake" analogy⁴

that many regional leaders attach to Iran. The most notable recent example came in response to the Arab Spring, when Iranian leaders appropriated the uprisings as a “second awakening” of the Islamic movement initiated during Iran’s 1979 revolution. The regime made such statements even after having violently suppressed its own peaceful demonstrators in the months after the June 2009 elections.

While this worldview can be traced back to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the revolutionary élan of 1979, the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is a strong exponent of the radical clash for dominance between Iran and much of “the rest.” His narrative pillories the West and the United States for opposing the essence of the revolution and its manifestation in Iran’s Islamic Republic. The revolution, according to Khamenei, has curtailed the ability of Western powers to exploit the region’s resources and “do whatever they liked.” In addition, the West allegedly fears the spirit of rebellion in the Islamic world, which finds its source in the Islamic Republic. Western action against the Islamic Republic, according to Khamenei, is thus driven by the lowly motive of impeding a movement toward ‘liberation.’ The West, in Khamenei’s view, is in decline: “The economic problems and the economic crisis in Europe are different from the economic problems that we may encounter. Our problems are like the problems of a group of climbers who are moving forward on a particular path.... The situation of Europeans is like the situation of a bus that is trapped under an avalanche.”⁵ Events such as the 2012 Nonaligned Movement Summit in Tehran and the engagement of two “ascending powers,” Turkey and Brazil, in negotiating an alleged nuclear compromise in spring 2010 feed this vision of Iran as the vanguard of a new world order. The collapse of the “pro-American” regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt provides further sustenance to this “decadence” theory.

Iran’s self-image is not shared by other Muslim-majority nations, especially regional rivals, yet Iran’s actions undeniably affect the entirety of the Middle East. And the rhetoric emanating from leaders of the Islamic Republic reflects more than religious and ideological sentiments, extending to regional hegemonic ambition. Members of the Iranian political and military elite have often been the source of such messages. Rear Adm. Ali Fadavi, the IRGC naval chief, thus stated, “The only power that can provide security for the [Gulf] region is the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the world is slowly grasping this.... The Americans live with the delusion that they are powerful.”⁶ Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, stated, “The Persian Gulf has always, is and shall always

belong to Iran.”⁷ Meanwhile, Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi reasserted Iran’s role as the Gulf’s guardian: “We [Iran] have announced that whatever we have belongs to all regional nations, and we are even ready to supply [Iranian-made weapons] to these countries.”⁸

In justifying Iran’s role as guardian of the Gulf region, high-ranking officials continuously present their country as the bulwark against invasive powers as exemplified by the United States. Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has argued: “Given Iran’s political, cultural and religious influence, [Khamenei] believes none of the critical issues facing the Middle East and Muslim world—Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Persian Gulf security, and the Arab-Israeli conflict—can be fully addressed or resolved without Tehran’s input.”⁹ Typical of the regime’s approach is the statement by Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis Committee for National Security and Foreign Policy, who asserted that “The Islamic Republic of Iran is the most influential country in the region which tightens regional security and has played a valuable role in defusing crisis and establishing security.”¹⁰

Decades of Western involvement in Iranian domestic affairs, as typified by support for the overthrow of democratically elected leader Muhammad Mossadeq in the 1950s and subsequent backing of the shah, have played into Iranian efforts to emphasize a narrative of Western meddling and corresponding Iranian political resilience. After President Obama’s Nowruz message to the Iranians in 2009—one of his first actions to reach out to Middle Eastern peoples—Khamenei stressed that Iranian foreign policy would be based on logic, not emotion, and that American rhetoric meant nothing unless accompanied by changed practice. The world’s hostility toward the United States, Iran reasons, is based on the U.S. tendency to act as an overseer that imposes its will on other states—ironically, the same position Iran takes in the Middle East.

When it comes to resisting sanctions in response to the Iranian nuclear program, Khamenei insists that such a move signals Iranian unwillingness to be pressured by the Americans in the same way other countries have been. “Choose your goals appropriately and pursue these goals in a steadfast way,” the Supreme Leader has said. “In this way, no power will be able to stand up against you.”¹¹ Even those in the elite disposed toward making a deal with the West echo this view; for instance, former negotiator Hossein Mousavian argued, “Even if the sanctions hurt the economy, it would not change the position of Iran on nuclear [issues]. It is a matter of national pride and sovereignty.”¹² In this regard, Khamenei speaks of the “economy of resistance”

to respond to the alleged U.S. sanctions goal of undermining Iran's national growth and employment, all the while increasing its isolation.

Recently, however, the tone in Tehran has changed with respect to sanctions. On the one hand, internal disputes have emerged, with high-level officials—notably Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larijani—blaming President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for Iran's economic woes. Even as much of this blame is still labeled “economic mismanagement,” the Supreme Leader himself has tellingly stepped away from his previous, seemingly impenetrable, stance denying the impact of sanctions. In July 2012 in a speech to government officials, Khamenei stated, “We acknowledge the pressures and the sanctions, and these pressures and sanctions are backed up with their economic capabilities, political capabilities, security capabilities and other such capabilities, particularly their media capabilities. This is a reality.” He also admitted, “Its intensity has not decreased, rather it has increased. And they have joined hands to magnify this reality.”¹³ In October 2012, in a speech to the people of the Bojnourd (in the North Khorasan province of Iran), Khamenei referred to the implementation of the sanctions against Iran as “irrational and brutal.”¹⁴

President Ahmadinejad's stance is another impediment to Western engagement with the Iranians. The main difference separating Ahmadinejad from former presidents Muhammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is his pool of constituents. While Khatami and Rafsanjani differed individually, they shared similar clerical backgrounds. Ahmadinejad's lower-class upbringing and his ties to the military mean that he must appease a different audience, a more hardline, less educated, and militia-like multitude. As a result, his language is more blunt, his confidence in Iran's revolutionary approach is greater, and his knowledge of the outside world is less. One interesting twist with Ahmadinejad is the apparent split between his adamant opposition to the U.S. government and his seeming receptivity to the American public, which he regards as opposed to U.S. policy and well disposed toward the Islamic Republic's stance. In an interview in 2007, Ahmadinejad said he believes the American people are well intentioned and was quick to remind Iranians that a conflict should not arise between them; instead, the focus should be on the U.S. government.¹⁵

The problem is that the Iranian leaders' view of the Islamic Republic as a regional hegemon collides with America's global security roles. As long as the United States holds to its principles, and its role as a global leader, Iran will see itself assuming the main role of opposition. Even a moderate formerly from

the upper rungs of the Iranian government such as Mousavian, placed under house arrest and essentially in exile in Princeton, New Jersey, describes the “price” for an Iranian deal with the West in terms of an Iranian security agenda clearly unacceptable to the United States and to most of the region. A starting point for negotiations would thus include: nuclear, chemical, and biological self-sufficiency “consistent” with the appropriate international nonproliferation agreements, an end to the U.S. military presence in the region, including Afghanistan and the Gulf, Iran as the key regional ally of Afghanistan and Iraq, a regional cooperation system for “security, stability, and peace” in the Gulf (with Iran as the assumed leader and the United States out), “Israel weakened,” the end of threats from the United States and Israel, prevention of the (U.S.) militarization of the region, and the end of U.S. “regime change efforts,” which are seen to include rhetorical support for democratic movements.

While experts can argue about fine points in the Iranian position, policymakers in the United States and around the world must take at face value the oft-repeated Iranian claims for what amounts to regional hegemony, and the implications of Iranian security demands on perceived security elsewhere in the region. As Henry Kissinger once noted, in a reference to revolutionary France that applies equally to revolutionary Iran, “The desire of one power for absolute security means absolute insecurity for all the others.”¹⁶ In reviewing the U.S. policy goals that follow, both universally and in the Middle East, Americans will thus see a deep divergence of U.S. and Iranian interests.

U.S. POLICY

U.S. global policy since World War II has been remarkably consistent, as summed up in the Obama administration’s May 2010 National Security Strategy (notable not only because of its consistency with earlier administrations’ statements but also because it largely reflects Obama administration practice): “enduring” American interests begin with “an international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.”¹⁷ Each element of this statement is critical to understanding U.S. actions: the goal—an international order; the actor—U.S. leadership; and the means—peace, security, and stronger cooperation to meet global challenges. While the specific language differs from case to case, the themes in this statement would have resembled the global policy statements of any number of postwar U.S. administrations. To carry out the policy, the National Security Strategy lays out specific goals:

- The security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners
- A strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity
- Respect for universal values at home and around the world

This is nothing less than a Wilsonian appeal for the United States to preserve and advance a broad international security agenda, encompassing not just America but also its “allies and partners,” which include scores of countries, through the promotion “around the world” of values that Americans take as universal.

As regards the Middle East, the National Security Strategy advocates carrying out the broad goals just outlined through relations with America’s allies and partners, as well as commitment to social, political, and economic development throughout the region. Supplementing the National Security Strategy is a January 2012 Defense Strategy Guidance paper published by the Department of Defense, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for Twenty-first Century Defense.” The top objectives offered in this paper include countering terror and irregular warfare, as well as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs by adversaries, deterring and defeating aggression, and projecting power in the face of asymmetrical threats in “anti-access and area-denial” environments.¹⁸ These priorities are all of immediate relevance to the security situation in the Middle East, despite the paper’s supposed bias toward the Asian “pivot.”

Longstanding U.S. policy toward Iran has been consistent with both U.S. global and regional objectives, and is thoroughly presented in the Obama administration’s 2010 National Security Strategy. To “promote a responsible Iran,” the strategy proposes the following:

For decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has endangered the security of the region and the United States and failed to live up to its international responsibilities. In addition to its illicit nuclear program, it continues to support terrorism, undermine peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and deny its people their universal rights.... Engagement is something we pursue without illusion. It can offer Iran a pathway to a better future, provided Iran’s leaders...change course, act to restore the confidence of the international community, and fulfill their obligations.... Yet if the Iranian Government continues to refuse to live up to its international obligations, it will face greater isolation.¹⁹

On the nuclear question, the strategy declares,

The United States will work to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.... [Iran] face[s] a clear choice...if Iran meets its international obligations on its nuclear program, [it] will be able to proceed on a path to greater political and

economic integration with the international community. If [it] ignore[s] [its] international obligations, we will pursue multiple means to increase [its] isolation and bring [it] into compliance with international norms.²⁰

The 2012 Defense Strategy Guidance paper singled out Iran by name in both its WMD and “projecting power” priorities.

But Iran, as this section has demonstrated, holds differing views on U.S. motives, on the underlying “universality” of American values, and on the resulting international political, security, and economic order. While the United States must keep in mind its policies’ specific impact on Iran, it must simultaneously, as a worldwide security provider, remain cognizant of the impact of its Iran policies on friends, and potential foes, around the world. Failure to deal effectively with a threat to the international order as blatant as Iran would have an extremely negative effect on U.S. influence and prestige worldwide, and make the American security mission all the harder to achieve.

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report on Military Power of Iran,” April 2012, <http://www.fas.org/man/eprint/dod-iran.pdf>, p. 1.
2. Patrick Clawson, *The Red Line: How to Assess Progress in U.S. Iran Policy*, Strategic Report 5 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, September 2010), p. 18, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/StrategicReport05.pdf>.
3. Article 154 of the *Constitutional Executive Authority of Iran*, <http://www.president.ir/en/president/functions>.
4. Arshad Mohammed and Ross Colvin, “Saudi King Urged U.S. to Attack Iran: WikiLeaks,” Reuters, November 29, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/29/us-wikileaks-usa-idUSTRE6AP06Z20101129>.
5. “Supreme Leader’s Speech to Government Officials,” Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, July 24, 2012, http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1655&Itemid=4.
6. “Tehran Sets Out Ambitious Naval Plans Amid Gulf Row,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 5, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tehran-sets-out-ambitious-naval-plans-amid-gulf-row.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29401&NewsCatID=352>.
7. Alexander Wilner, “U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Iran’s Perceptions of Its External Relations and Their Implications for Strategic Competition with the U.S. in the Gulf, Sept. 2010–May 2011,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 19, 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/I10519_Diplomatic_Report.pdf, p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
9. Karim Sadjadpour, “The Supreme Leader,” in *Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2010), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/supreme-leader>.
10. Alexander Wilner, “U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Iran’s Perceptions of Its External Relations and Their Implications for Strategic Competition with the U.S. in the Gulf, Sept. 2010–May 2011,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 19, 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/I10519_Diplomatic_Report.pdf, p. 2.

11. "Supreme Leader's Speech to Students," Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, November 2, 2011, http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1571&Itemid=4.
12. Sylvain Cypel, "Ambassador Mousavian Interview with Le Monde 01/17/2012," *Le Monde*, trans. January 21, 2012, from French to English, <http://www.princeton.edu/sgs/faculty-staff/seyed-hossein-mousavian/Le-Monde-t-jan-21-12.pdf>.
13. "Supreme Leader's Speech to Government Officials," Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, July 24, 2012, http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1655&Itemid=4.
14. "Speech to the People of Bojnourd" (Persian), Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, October 10, 2012, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=21126>.
15. "The Difference between American Policymakers and American Citizens with Respect to Iran" (Persian), interview with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on satellite radio, September 16, 2007, <http://www.president.ir/pages/fa/president/outlooks/server.php?mid=1140>.
16. Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 1-3.
17. White House, "National Security Strategy" (May 2010), p. 7, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
18. U.S. Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for Twenty-first Century Defense," January 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf, p. 4.
19. White House, "National Security Strategy" (May 2010), p.26, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

CHAPTER 2

THE ENDURING CONFLICT

GIVEN THE UNDERLYING CONFLICT in worldviews between Iran and the United States, diplomatic and military collision has been inevitable since 1979, in what author David Crist calls the “Twilight War.”¹ As Crist details, that “war” has involved direct military confrontations, including the 1980 attempt to rescue U.S. embassy hostages and the Tanker War, proxy conflicts in Lebanon in the 1980s and Iraq in the last decade, terrorist and covert gambits including the Khobar Towers bombing and repeated press reports of U.S. sabotage of Iranian nuclear facilities, as well as military threats and demonstrations, primarily in the Gulf. Iran has used its ideological claim for Islamic leadership to challenge the West, while championing political causes that resound in the region such as opposition to Israel. The United States, in turn, has mobilized regional military and diplomatic support behind an informal defensive alliance, tasked NATO with defense against long-range Iranian weapons, and used the UN Security Council successfully to condemn, and levy sanctions against, Iran’s nuclear program. Iran has built a competing regional “arc” with Syria, Lebanese Hizballah, Hamas (until recently), and various Iraqi Shiite groups, while supporting the “Shiite cause” regionally. Most recently, the United States and other members of the informal alliance have backed Syrian rebels, in part to strike a strategic blow against Iran.

Despite extraordinary efforts by both sides, with the issue sometimes dominating both countries’ foreign policy agendas, neither side has scored a “knockout blow.” Iran’s twin defeats at the end of the 1980s—first by Iraq and then by the United States in the Tanker War—weakened the country’s international challenge, leading to a decade-plus of temporary moderation and more rational leadership, but they did not permanently alter Iran’s orientation or goals. Likewise, the U.S. military triumphs in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001–2003 had only a temporary tactical impact on Iran (cessation of the nuclear weapons research program; greater willingness to talk to Washington). Similarly, the alleged strategic “gift” to Iran of eliminating Saddam Hussein and empowering Iraq’s Shiite majority has not been a game changer to Iran’s benefit. This is demonstrated by Iran’s generally parlous economic

and diplomatic state today, abetted by Iraq's growing oil exports that facilitate U.S. energy sanctions against Iran. The sanctions' purpose is not to "punish" anyone, but to extract a price, and to serve as a lesson to others around the world—always an American preoccupation—that challenging international norms comes with a price.

But both sides still hope for a knockout blow. The Iranians thus put their eggs in the nuclear basket, apparently believing that a nuclear weapons capability will neutralize superior American military capabilities and push regional competitors to vassal status. The United States and various regional states have also sought game changers. One perennially floated idea is "regime change," most explicitly proclaimed in President Bush's 2005 inaugural address but really never seriously followed up on—though it is not clear how much Washington could have done to promote peaceful change in Iran even with much effort. Given the regime's unpopularity, its inability to meet the desires of the Iranian people, and the repeated mass demonstrations against it, the Islamic Republic may well disappear one day. That would be a game changer, since the main driver for Iran's activities to which the United States objects is its revolutionary ideology. But it would be unrealistic to base U.S. policy on such a regime change happening any time soon.

Absent change from within the Islamic Republic, there is no conceivable knockout blow that would end Iran's challenge to U.S. interests. Particularly after the Iraq War, virtually no one advocates a military solution to the full range of challenges Iran poses to U.S. interests. Some appear to believe that a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, at least by the United States, would bring Iran to its senses. But there is no empirical or historical evidence to buttress such a claim; rather, considerable precedent from the late 1980s suggests Iran's willingness to escalate rather than yield until its very military fabric is threatened by a massive U.S. military operation—a type the United States will not likely undertake. Likewise, even as a strike or air campaign by the United States might slow the Iranian nuclear program, and perhaps change Iran's "risk evaluation" related to nuclear decisions, it likely would not produce a fundamental shift in regime attitudes, goals, and, ultimately, ideology.

The hopes for change in U.S.-Iran relations thus have hinged repeatedly on U.S. or international efforts to persuade Iran to modify its regional objectives and to some degree its worldview, in return for one or another set of concessions. David Crist notes the extraordinary lengths to which various U.S. administrations have gone to attempt such a "flip."² The Reagan administration's effort was the most far reaching and led to nothing but serious domes-

tic trouble. Other administrations, including that of President George H. W. Bush, tried one or another approach. In the face of failure, the Bush administration eventually abandoned its outreach policy, ensuring that Iran was not invited to the Madrid Peace Conference, held after the Gulf War. President Obama initially followed a rapprochement model with his two letters to Khamenei, but they generated unsatisfactory responses.

NOTES

1. David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 571–572.

CHAPTER 3

ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT IMPASSE

BEFORE REVIEWING POLICY OPTIONS, it is important to inventory various issues at play between Iran, on one side, and much of the international community, led by the United States, on the other. These issues include: the nuclear issue, conventional military confrontation, Iranian unconventional/terrorist activity, the U.S. public mood, economic vulnerabilities, diplomatic efforts, and the Iranian domestic situation. The volume of material produced in the English-language academic, policy institute, media, and government realms alone on these subjects is immense. The following write-up draws upon but does not attempt to summarize this literature; rather, it seeks to spotlight certain elements that are especially relevant to policy.

BACKGROUND

Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, or at least an acknowledged capability to produce or deploy them, understandably dominates the international confrontation with the Islamic Republic. As noted earlier, an Iranian success here could help it substantially to break out of the thirty-year confrontation with the West, foreclosing U.S. military deterrence, enhancing leverage with the Gulf states, and promoting Iran as the region's unquestioned first power. Aside from this serious threat, an Iranian nuclear weapon or nuclear capability could blow the nonproliferation regime apart, encouraging other Middle Eastern states to develop nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Israel sees such a capability as an existential threat that absolutely must be eliminated.¹ Finally, an Iranian nuclear weapon serving as a deterrent could be a multiplier of Iran's terrorist and other unconventional tactics, just as the Soviets' nuclear arsenal complemented their offensive ground capability.²

In response to Iran's nuclear program, the United States has developed an impressive, multifaceted system based on overarching de facto and de jure alliances (with the Gulf states, Israel, NATO, the European Union, and the UN Security Council) to develop antimissile defenses, pursue negotiations to halt the program while condemning it internationally through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and UN Security Council, and punish

Iran ever more severely through economic, financial, oil, and military sanctions. Reported strikes against the nuclear program through covert actions add to the initiative's impact. Finally, both Israel and, in 2012, the United States have unequivocally declared their willingness to use force against the nuclear program,³ although the point at which each nation would act appears to differ. (Israel consistently refers to preventing nuclear weapons capability while the Obama administration generally speaks of preventing nuclear weapons, occasionally moving closer to the Israeli stance.)⁴ Taken together, this stand-off between Iran and the international community is undoubtedly the most significant, high-visibility, intensive, and dangerous clash on diplomatic, military, and economic fronts alike anywhere in the world today.

Operationally, this U.S. strategy has been professional and efficient. After the September 11 attacks, international attention by the IAEA, along with the comparatively moderate Iranian leadership and an America on the march, led to Iran's temporarily suspending enrichment, signing the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and, according to the U.S. 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, shutting down most of its specific nuclear weapons work in 2003.⁵ While the Iranians in the Ahmadinejad era have returned to a more confrontational policy, events such as the aborted 2010 deal with the Turks and Brazilians show some willingness by the regime to consider alternatives to confrontation.⁶

The United States has had considerable success mobilizing the international community against the Iranian nuclear effort, and increasing dramatically the costs for the regime of continuing its present course of action. This has been the case especially since the United States joined the Europeans to form the P5 + 1 (five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) negotiating team in 2006, paving the way to a series of ever more biting Chapter VII Security Council resolutions through 2010. Furthermore, the Security Council position provided diplomatic cover for much more aggressive U.S. and now EU economic, financial, and oil sanctions. Another effect of the UN and bilateral sanctions and other measures has been the portrayal of Iran as an international outcast, at least among non-Third World audiences, while reducing its economic and military capabilities.

But all these efforts have not stopped the Iranian march toward nuclear capability. Nevertheless, the extraordinary costs to Iran generated by this U.S.-led strategy, the resolve displayed in implementing it, and the international commitment are all ends in themselves in any long-term confrontation with Iran, at least as long as Iran doesn't ultimately possess nuclear weapons. In the

psychological battle for regional support, the weaker Iran is, the less threatening its various gambits and programs will be. Furthermore, as this mix of tools has caused Iran to reconsider at times elements of its nuclear program, it could eventually suffice to deter Iran from taking the final steps to develop an unquestioned nuclear capability, or actually deploy nuclear weapons.

In the end, it remains uncertain whether the United States will be successful in preventing Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon or capability through its present set of actions. That goal can be obtained only by one of the following “resolution” situations: a negotiated agreement incorporating far-reaching commitments and transparency; a unilateral Iranian decision to stop or postpone indefinitely its effort in the face of international opprobrium and sanctions; or decisive military action. Most analysts believe that the last option is beyond the capability of Israel,⁷ and some believe that to achieve absolute certainty in hobbling the program even the United States would have to follow up on an air campaign with a ground invasion.⁸ Given limits to American intelligence capabilities, the Iranians’ proven ability to disperse and hide centrifuges, enriched uranium, and weaponization work, and the extreme unlikelihood of a U.S. ground operation, a prudent policymaker should assume that military action could delay Iran’s nuclear progress but would not decisively resolve the issue.

What this all means—and here is one basis for Israeli discomfort—is that the package of U.S. actions just described, from sanctions to the deterrent threat of military action, cannot directly produce one of the three resolution situations to guarantee prevention. Rather, this package can pressure Iran to move toward one or another of the three situations by slowing down Iran’s nuclear program, forcing the regime to pay an increasingly high price economically, diplomatically, and presumably politically for continuing its program, and raising the risk of a military engagement with unknown but possibly disastrous consequences. In the end, the U.S.-led international campaign against Iran resembles the Allied strategic bombing campaign in Germany during World War II, not the atomic strikes on Japan.

Until one of the three decisive resolution situations is achieved, the most the United States can do is review the components of the current pressure-plus-negotiations effort to make it more effective. Can Washington give Tehran a more plausible positive reason to reach a negotiated agreement? Can it work to increase the pressures imposed by international and bilateral sanctions? Can the United States make the threat of eventual military strikes more plausible? On all three counts, seeking improvements would be worth the

effort, although even “better” components to American strategy would not guarantee success. Napoleon had his entire army destroyed in 1812, again in 1813, then in 1814, but almost won at Waterloo a year later. The Iranians themselves continued their “two-front war” against the United States and Iraq in 1987–1988 well after the outcome was clear. In short, totalitarian regimes don’t easily throw in the towel.

ADDITIONAL STEPS

Looking first at the P5+1’s negotiating strategy, Dennis Ross, the former advisor to four presidents, has argued that only a “big for big” approach can help move the United States toward its goals. By contrast, “little for little” measures aimed at building confidence offer neither side a sufficiently attractive result to counterbalance the perceived costs. In taking the “big” approach, the P5+1 would lay out a far-reaching compromise offer but demand a response forthwith, without interminable shopping for a better deal.⁹ Various experts, most recently former national security advisor Stephen Hadley in his “Option Two” framework,¹⁰ have sketched out such an offer. As detailed by Hadley, Iran would have to agree to

- cease enrichment beyond 3.5 percent;
- ship anything enriched beyond 3.5 percent out of the country, as well as most of its 3.5 percent stockpile;
- curtail expansion of the Fordow enrichment plant;
- allow intrusive inspections by the IAEA to verify compliance with all of the above.

In return, the United States and international community would

- supply fuel and medical isotopes for Iran’s medical research reactor;
- provide spare parts for civilian aircraft;
- not impose any further sanctions and gradually lift those already in place as Iran’s compliance with the agreement was demonstrated.

In terms of increasing pressure on Iran, little new can be done. The pressure, particularly targeting the financial sector and oil exports, is already immense, ameliorated only temporarily by strong Iranian foreign currency reserves (discussed later). Persuading Russia, China, and perhaps other Security Council states to adopt additional UN sanctions will be difficult absent dramatic new Iranian provocations, or an imminent U.S. strike to be deterred. Direct, covert

actions have reportedly been quite successful, but their lead time is long, and certain tactics eventually could provoke Iranian retaliation or international discomfort. The same rule applies for unilateral U.S. or EU sanctions. The impact additional sanctions will have on a suffering population creates concerns, and further oil sanctions without careful diplomatic engagement with other suppliers could drive up oil prices.

Beyond a more comprehensive negotiating offer, the remaining tool is to make more credible the strike option. The current U.S.-Israeli dispute hinges on what action-based or temporal redline the Obama administration may identify as the trigger for its “prevent nuclear weapons” military action, and whether to communicate this redline to the Iranians to enhance the threat’s credibility. The Israelis have adopted their own redline, as expressed dramatically during Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s September 2012 speech to the UN General Assembly: the point at which Iran would have sufficient 20-percent-enriched uranium to start a rapid process of creating enough highly enriched uranium to make a weapon.¹¹ The Israelis are advocating publicizing a prospective U.S. redline as well, while the Obama administration is resisting. American hesitations are understandable, as no country wants to tie its hands on a life-or-death issue; indeed, any redline could produce objectionable Iranian activity just short of the line, possibly forcing the United States (e.g., in Korea in 1950) to intervene even when an announced U.S. redline is not crossed. The approach to any temporal deadline, apart from questions of logic (why, after decades, one month rather than another?), would undoubtedly produce debilitating second thoughts on the part of various allies and possibly Americans, easily exploitable by Tehran through feigned last-ditch flexibility.

But the U.S. position still carries a major problem: the perception that the window between actionable, high-probability intelligence of an impending Iranian weapon—thus triggering President Obama’s commitment to act—and the actual acquisition or deployment of a nuclear weapon might be too brief for U.S. action. This reasoning, of course, is based on the assumption that the United States could or would not strike once Iran had a weapon. But the U.S. experience with deterrence provides examples of how to make credible a general warning without providing a fixed redline or deadline. U.S. policy on when to initiate nuclear strikes in Europe against a Soviet conventional advance was never spelled out, but the United States ensured “facts on the ground”—short-range, politically more-usable nuclear systems deployed in a “use or lose” posture—that would make going nuclear a high-probability risk

in the face of a successful Soviet ground offensive. Likewise, before launching airstrikes during the first Gulf War, the United States undertook strenuous diplomatic activity to signal the approach of a deadline and justify eventual action on the basis of having done everything possible in advance.

With Iran, credibility-enhancing steps could include one redline of sorts—a declaration by the president that immediate, automatic military action would follow the announcement of, or intelligence indicating, the existence of Iranian nuclear weapons. Such action would be aimed at destroying either the weapons or else the delivery systems, command-and-control apparatus, and entire industrial and scientific infrastructure supporting both the nuclear and the rocket programs. This decision would obviously be very serious. All the same, it is well worth considering, given the difficulties in defining a trigger point for military prevention before Iran reaches this threshold and the extraordinary impact on regional stability and U.S. credibility if America were stuck with a policy of containing a nuclear Iran. In this strike scenario, the assumption would be that Iran had not yet produced a significant number of devices or sufficient uranium enriched at more than 90 percent to weaponize systems capable of threatening even its neighbors, let alone the United States.

A second step for the United States would be to plan for and signal to the Israelis, U.S. allies and P5+1 partners, and the American public that once it is on the threshold of possible military action, it will deploy various military and diplomatic steps to show its seriousness while also attempting to convince the Iranians not to proceed any further with its nuclear activities. Such a campaign would mirror the diplomatic, public information, and congressional campaign before the first Gulf War. A third step would be to escalate covert actions against Iran, which have the great advantage over declaratory statements—no matter how tough—of demonstrating U.S. preparedness to act. Covert actions have the further advantage, because the public seldom is aware of them, of sparing Tehran the difficult position of having to appear to bend to U.S. pressure.

While the “when” or “upon what” can be kept vague (e.g., moving to enrich beyond 20 percent, restarting weaponization, making progress on a plutonium reactor, or ceasing cooperation with the IAEA), sketching out the “what” of these measures (e.g., dramatic military moves, presidential messages to Tehran, deployment of “final” compromises, breaking off of the P5+1 talks, preparation to release oil reserves, going to the UN Security Council, briefings of the U.S. Congress) would enhance confidence that the United States is serious, and has, as Henry Kissinger recently noted, little choice having tried the

negotiation route.¹² It would also increase the international and domestic U.S. legal argument for using force, a problem raised recently by John Bellinger and Jeffrey Smith.¹³ The United States, moreover, could authoritatively communicate this position, as laid out by President Obama and modified by the legal experts just mentioned, to the Iranians and make public the communication. (The administration so far has yet to inform the public clearly whether it has passed the life-or-death U.S. position clarified at AIPAC and the UN General Assembly directly to Tehran.)

A further consideration involves the nature and specific purpose of the military action and prospective Iranian response. The type of strike employed will depend on the particular goals—ranging from signaling to actual system destruction—as well as on the diplomatic situation and the need to either forestall (by limiting strikes) or destroy (by expanding strikes) an Iranian military riposte. On the limited side, a strike could entail long-range bombers directing cruise missiles at one or two key targets essentially to send a message or take out a capability, possibly unattributed. On the expansive side, a massive campaign could take aim not only at the entire nuclear infrastructure but also at Iran's air-defense assets and offensive capabilities, especially ballistic missiles, mines and minelaying craft, submarines and antishipping missiles.¹⁴ Still, in the view of many analysts, even while extended military strikes by the United States alone or in concert with Israel could destroy or severely damage the most important known nuclear facilities in Iran, such an effort would only set back Iran's nuclear program by perhaps four years.¹⁵ In other words, not even a U.S. strike could definitively "resolve" either the overall Iranian problem or its nuclear component.

Policymakers have to calculate carefully Iran's likely response to various levels of a potential strike. A prudent assumption, as discussed later, would include both conventional and unconventional or terrorist actions. The impact of such actions will vary based on Iranian intentions and capabilities, and the effectiveness in offsetting U.S. or Israeli action. Another prudent assumption would be that Iranian retaliation would include a toll in U.S. lives, hit U.S. facilities, and affect American interests throughout the region, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even in an optimistic case, in which an Iranian military response would be measured and essentially proportional with the intention of avoiding further escalation, the regime might well take the opportunity to throw the IAEA out of Iran, leave the NPT, and pursue an entirely clandestine nuclear program.¹⁶

Finally, the United States must carefully think through how to benefit from a post-strike scenario, given the likelihood that neither Iran's nuclear weap-

ons capabilities nor its intentions will have been permanently changed, that a conventional clash could have severe costs for both the United States and the Iranians, and that a U.S. strike could undercut international support for tough UN Security Council resolutions.

Given these various possibilities, it is not surprising that some in the policy community are unconvinced that prevention makes sense. Analysts such as James Joyner of the Atlantic Council argue that it would be better to contain a nuclear Iran, as the United States has done with a variety of distasteful nuclear regimes since World War II.¹⁷ MIT's Barry Posen has taken a similar position.¹⁸ And Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian exiled in London, points to another problem. War with Israel (and presumably a limited exchange with the United States), she has argued, may rescue the Iranian regime at a time when it is extremely unpopular at home and clinging to power. "It is the only thing that can save the regime," she said. "A war will stir nationalistic feelings and rally the people behind the government to defend the country. It will be catastrophic for the [Iranian] people, the country, and the region, but it will save Iran's rulers."¹⁹ Nevertheless, one need not fully accept Charles Krauthammer's recent slashing attack on the logic of containment²⁰ applied to a state in his view characterized by messianic religion and suicide bombers to understand that containing a nuclear-armed Iran, given the violence, volatility, and instability of the region, would be a "very hard job."²¹ In addition, Israel publicly and Arab states privately have signaled that they would not live with such an Iran.

Whatever one thinks about President Obama's prevention policy, his repeated and voluble backing of such a policy—and the policy's enthusiastic endorsement by his Republican opponents and by Congress—commits the United States to the approach. Were the United States not to follow through on its firm declaratory stance, the implications for the credibility of U.S. security commitments elsewhere, such as its extended deterrence in northeast Asia and Eastern Europe, would be serious.

CONVENTIONAL MILITARY CONFRONTATION

From the U.S. standpoint, a conventional military exchange with Iran in the Gulf or wider region is not a desirable course of action, given the risks, though Washington for good reason avoids saying so publicly. Such an unwanted scenario could emerge following an Iranian response—including a possible miscalculation—to U.S. policies pressuring Iran or to a U.S. or Israeli strike on nuclear facilities. The U.S. interest is in maximizing the

threat and credibility of other pressure tactics short of a strike and deterring an Iranian military response to such tactics; but if deterrence fails, the U.S. interest will be winning the exchange. The Iranian interest is, first, to exploit the risks involved in a conventional exchange to deter U.S. and Israeli action. Second, if such an exchange occurs, Tehran's interest will be to claim victory or otherwise exploit the violence to advance Iran's internal and regional goals, regardless of the "body count" at the cessation of hostilities.²²

Beyond the differing strategic attitudes involved, evaluating the potential impact of a military clash is complicated by the difficulty in judging the military balance between Iran and the United States and its friends. On the one hand, a military strike by either the United States or Israel might generate no Iranian response at all, or only a very limited one (e.g., ballistic missile strikes on limited targets associated with the perceived attacker). On the other hand, a strike, or an accidental confrontation, could touch off a full-blown conflict. But even such a wider conflict—unlike the U.S. campaign against Iraq in the first Gulf War—is unlikely to last long enough to lead to the mobilization of the vast majority of the U.S. order of battle, nor the majority of its Iranian counterpart.

Furthermore, in any short conflict, the two sides may measure success differently. The Iranians, as many analysts argue, are prepared to fight asymmetrically, drawing on the lessons of the Tanker War, using small boats, mines, submarines, shore-based antishipping missiles, longer-range ballistic missile strikes on bases and U.S. allies' infrastructure and possibly population centers, and terrorist actions to inflict losses, gain prestige, intimidate U.S. allies, push American forces onto the defensive, and demonstrate resolve, even in the face of their own serious losses.²³ "Asymmetrical" does not refer only to weapons systems and personnel but rather to the nature of the conflict itself and measurements of its success. Some Iranian hardliners, it has been asserted, might regard a strike as a blessing in disguise,²⁴ as it could kindle revolutionary fervor, or be considered a moral victory.²⁵ Such thinking always assumes that the Iranians are right in calculating that a U.S. military action would not threaten the regime's survival.

Iran certainly has sufficient military potential to threaten key U.S. interests. Anthony Cordesman states that Iran's improved ability to "deter U.S. naval and air operations against Iran (as well as those of Israel and other states)...provide[s] Iran with improved military options against targets in the Gulf region. The end result is a constant and growing challenge to the U.S. in the Gulf region, particularly in terms of air, missile, and naval war-

fare, as well as a challenge to the U.S. in providing military support and transfer to the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states, Israel, and Iraq.”²⁶ Cordesman then cites advanced Iranian mines purchased from the Russians and Chinese, which complement the huge fleet of small but heavily armed boats. Further, he notes, Iran can deliver mines and fire long-range wake-homing torpedoes using its easily concealed submarines, thereby complicating a potential counterattack.

Given these military capabilities, it is no surprise that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey acknowledged in January 2012 that Iran could temporarily close the Strait of Hormuz, although he argued that the United States could swiftly reopen it.²⁷ Such closure, or even the threat of it, or threats or action against oil tankers in the region, could send oil prices spiraling upward, pressuring U.S. allies and possibly the U.S. public to press for a ceasefire. The U.S. Central Command’s 2012 “Internal Look”²⁸ and various Naval War College studies and exercises²⁹ have underlined the risky nature of a conventional exchange in the Gulf in sobering terms. Iran’s missiles present another sort of threat. The Pentagon’s “Annual Report on Military Power of Iran,” published in April 2012, inventories Iran’s short-range missiles to target Gulf region allies, and medium-range missiles to target Israel, as well as Iranian work on a multistage space launch test bed that could well be a precursor to an intercontinental ballistic missile. Its first test flight will likely be by 2015. Iran can also rely on both the extended-range variant of the Shahab-3 and the Ashura 2,000-kilometer medium-range ballistic missile.³⁰

While such missiles presumably do not have the accuracy and conventional warheads to threaten hardened U.S. or allied bases, such capabilities would not be necessary in an asymmetrical campaign. Rather, the missiles threaten soft targets in allied countries, particularly in the Gulf, where states “lack the same strategic depth that Iran possesses...[and] are vulnerable to...selective attacks that aim to cripple their critical infrastructure [e.g., desalination facilities].”³¹ Cordesman’s strategic conclusion:

Much now depends on the extent Gulf states would cooperate effectively with the U.S. The U.S. cannot fight a modern air war using carriers and ship-based cruise missiles alone...It would take a full range of U.S.-enablers including... land-based air defense and strike fighters, refuelers and support/arming/recovery bases to fight such a conflict.³²

The Gulf states, while increasingly tied to the United States, and increasingly integrated into a regional air-defense and antiballistic-missile system, thus are also a vulnerability.

So, could the United States win such a conflict? The answer is almost certainly yes, as the West defines “victory,” especially given the “escalation dominance” the United States could exert in deploying forces from around the world.³³ But in view of Iran’s different definition of victory, it too could see advantages to a struggle—detering or punishing America’s regional allies, striking a symbolic blow against Israel, bloodying the United States (which almost lost two major surface combatants to serious damage in the Gulf in 1987–1988),³⁴ demonstrating at least temporary control of the Strait, thereby driving up oil prices, and launching terrorist attacks at U.S. or Israeli interests. Would these small victories counterbalance what would likely be an eventual major U.S. conventional triumph along the lines of 1988? No—if the United States waged asymmetrical combat that threatened Iran’s key military assets. But another question emerges along with this scenario: would an Iranian assessment of the costs and benefits of such military engagement—again, a different calculus from America’s—deter its involvement? Little indication suggests this would be the case, particularly given the decentralized, initiative-hungry nature of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) military forces in the Gulf.

If Iran is not deterred from such action, then the question is whether the United States can prevail decisively in a conflict so as to leave no doubt in anyone’s mind. In this regard, various authors and analysts have suggested that the United States prepare to respond asymmetrically and ensure Iran is aware of these preparations, to be aimed at threatening regime military or infrastructure targets and changing the strategic picture to Iran’s detriment.³⁵ As Michael Eisenstadt and David Crist argue:

The United States should respond to this heightened potential for conflict by putting Tehran on notice that it is prepared for these eventualities, by quietly sending unambiguous signals to Iran through diplomatic and military channels and the media. This should give Tehran reason for pause, because a covert attack against an alert enemy is less likely to succeed and more likely to be traced to its source.... Given the current mindset of key leaders in Tehran, restraint is likely to be interpreted as weakness—and will only embolden and strengthen hard-liners.... Washington should also inform Tehran that it will not necessarily respond in a symmetrical or proportionate manner to Iranian provocations.³⁶

If, however, the United States is not certain to prevail unmistakably in an exchange, then any U.S. or Israeli strike, or even a more aggressive U.S. military presence in the Gulf, risking Iranian deliberate or inadvertent military response and escalation, exposes the United States to very significant risk.

UNCONVENTIONAL/TERRORIST ACTIVITY

Iran's ability to respond to a strike, or an inadvertent incident, is not limited to engagements in the Gulf and ballistic missile launches. The regime has a whole repertoire of lethal measures available through its IRGC elements and proxy forces. These begin with possible conventional missile barrages or insurgent attacks on U.S. diplomatic or military installations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Particularly troubling on the unconventional side, also known as the "twilight struggle," is Iran's active involvement in such activities. In mid-2011, for instance, Iranians worked through Iraqi proxies to attack U.S. positions and generate casualties in southern Iraq and Baghdad.³⁷

Iran has shown itself to be engaged in tit-for-tat operations elsewhere as well. With accusations flying over Iranian involvement in the assassination plot against the Saudi ambassador to the United States, the Islamic Republic seems to have responded with a wave of attacks from Bulgaria to Cambodia, along with purported cyberattacks on U.S. networks and, until recently, harassment of U.S. military assets in the Gulf. Credible reports also suggest foreign or foreign-backed assassinations of Iranian officials and scientists, attacks on infrastructure, and cyber operations inside Iran. While dangerous under any circumstances, such activities, particularly cyber, signal an especially high risk for accidental escalation given the lack of two-way communication, lack of clear knowledge of each other's redlines, and a likely Iranian perception developed over the years that the United States will not respond effectively to Iranian provocations. Crist asserts, for example, that "When Iran killed U.S. soldiers and marines in Lebanon and Iraq, successive administrations showed timidity when hard liners demanded action."³⁸

Iran could decide to step up the unconventional war, for instance, in the aftermath of a strike against its nuclear facilities. With Hizballah estimated to have up to 50,000 rockets able to reach Israel,³⁹ its leadership presumably could be persuaded to unleash at least part of its arsenal against Israel following an Israeli strike. Iran also has Hizballah's and its own covert and terrorist cells, which are well capable of striking U.S., Israeli, and other Western targets, along with other possibly less well-defended government targets worldwide. Two of Iran's allies are at least temporarily out of the picture, however: Syria and Hamas. Syria's ability to tie down significant Israeli forces is limited as long as the civil war there continues. And that same civil war has forced Hamas to flee Syria, calling into question its willingness to launch missile strikes out of Gaza on Iranian orders despite its November 2012 rocket barrages against Israel.

THE U.S. PUBLIC MOOD

Any consideration of the conventional military balance must consider a war-weary American population, and the possibility that U.S. political leaders will be unwilling to demand of it more sacrifices. The relative absence of references to American military action, or even the Americans fighting in Afghanistan, in the recent presidential campaign foretells institutional military inertia even after the second Obama administration comes together. This argument is buttressed by polling. According to a recent Chicago Council survey, while 64 percent of Americans see the Iranian nuclear program as a critical threat to the United States, second only to international terrorism, they stop short of supporting military strikes against the Islamic Republic. The preferred approach, endorsed by 80 percent of respondents, is the one now being pursued: imposition of tighter economic sanctions. Essentially the same proportion (79 percent) approves of continuing diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium. In response to a separate question, 67 percent say the United States should be willing to meet and talk with Iranian leaders. A slim majority (51 percent) opposes UN authorization of a military strike against Iran's nuclear energy facilities, with a substantial minority (45 percent) supporting such action. But, most important, a far broader majority (70 percent) opposes a unilateral U.S. strike, unauthorized by the Security Council, if Iran continues to enrich uranium.⁴⁰ On the other hand, a Pew survey out in October 2012 found, in comparison to January 2012, that the percentage of respondents favoring a hard line on Iran's nuclear program over avoiding a military conflict had risen from 50 to 56 percent, while those favoring avoiding a military conflict had dropped from 41 to 35 percent. (The question was less explicit on favoring military force "on our own" than the Chicago survey, however.)⁴¹

In the end, however, U.S. policy may be at least as much influenced by what happens in Congress as by public opinion polls. Congress voted overwhelmingly to make prevention U.S. policy. Some have debated whether Congress should authorize the use of force against Iran in the event Tehran gets close to a bomb. Such an authorization would be a powerful indicator of U.S. seriousness, and for that reason, any such decision should be weighed very carefully.

ECONOMIC CONFLICT

One major effect of the U.S.-crafted international alliance is strong and growing economic pressure on Iran. The effectiveness of this campaign in damaging Iran's economy cannot be denied, but, as with other "attrition" actions,

the pain inflicted cannot be guaranteed to change Iran's intention to pursue nuclear weapons.⁴² The sanctions themselves are of three sorts. First are the UN Security Council sanctions under legally-binding Chapter VII. These are more political than practical, although they do limit Iran's access to nuclear and missile technology very significantly, ban exports of Iranian weapons (a provision often violated with Syria and Hizballah), and limit the international engagements (travel, financial dealings) of entities and individuals linked to the illicit nuclear program. The second type of sanctions are on trade in Iranian oil and other products, as imposed by the United States, and now the EU, and these are far more damaging economically. Unlike the UN Chapter VII sanctions, these are not legally binding on states and institutions, but they cleverly target banks and other financial institutions, thus leveraging the dollar's commanding international position to essentially compel states to comply at the risk of having their key financial and monetary institutions excluded from the international economy. The third type of sanctions consists of informal pressure by the U.S. Treasury Department on business and financial institutions to cut off trade with targeted Iranian entities. While the latter two sets of sanctions have been by far the most successful in inflicting pain, the UN sanctions and the IAEA condemnation of Iranian activities form a necessary international political justification for the broad acceptance of U.S., and now EU, sanctions.

As of fall 2012, the impact of the sanctions on the Iranian economy has been significant: Iranian oil exports are down by an estimated 40 percent, and earnings have fallen by an almost equal amount.⁴³ Thanks to increases in crude oil exports from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Libya, among other sources, and decreased global demand, the drop in Iranian exports has been largely balanced, with no significant hike in oil prices.⁴⁴ With prices stagnant and export volumes down, Iran's oil export earnings have fallen dramatically, leading to an ever greater Iranian account deficit, driving up consumer prices enormously in Iran, and collapsing the Iranian currency by 40 percent.⁴⁵ Absent export or storage capacity, wells are being shut down, with potentially serious longer-term effects on the Iranian oil industry.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Iran has significant hard currency reserves, estimated at more than \$100 billion at the end of 2011 and ranked twenty-second in the world (although current available reserves appear to be considerably less).⁴⁷ Iran thus could cover the 40 percent drop in oil revenues by drawing down its currency reserves for up to several years. But such a policy beyond a certain point would be extremely foolhardy.

These sanctions are thus the most powerful current tool in the arsenal against Iran. But, as with diplomatic isolation, covert actions, the threat of military strikes, or even strikes themselves short of an apocalyptic outcome, they can only increase the pain and raise the cost of Iran pursuing nuclear weapons. They cannot force Iran to stop.

Furthermore, Iran has its own repertoire of political-economic tools with which to respond to sanctions. If, for example, the Tehran regime could force Iraq, already subject to Iranian pressure, to reduce or slow the increase of its crude exports, and if simultaneously oil demand grew based on better global economic news, then the sanctions could lead to significantly higher consumer energy prices worldwide. More dramatically, Iran, particularly if its oil exports were cut by even more, could impede the 20 percent of global oil trade using the Strait of Hormuz. While the United States and its friends could respond quickly to such actions, the impact on oil prices could be so severe as to pressure the U.S. to back off on sanctions, as foreseen in the relevant legislation. Finally, oil sanctions indirectly require considerable international consensus to maintain their legitimacy. A U.S. or an Israeli policy vis-à-vis Iran seen as risky to markets, or a harsh impact of sanctions on the Iranian population, could split the international community and weaken many states' willingness to implement sanctions.

DIPLOMATIC BALANCE

The United States has put together an impressive set of regional and global alliances not only to pressure Iran on the nuclear issue but also to contain its military reach and resist its political ambitions. Even as fissures within the alliances limit their effectiveness somewhat, collective pressure overall represents a major plus for the United States and helps counterbalance international trump cards played by Iran. Within the region, the United States has built up what amounts to a GCC-centric military alliance, based on the GCC's own efforts, to culminate in the December 2012 GCC Summit.⁴⁸ This alliance has been supplemented recently by U.S. engagement with the GCC as a whole, and ever greater military integration, both within the GCC and collectively and individually with the United States.

The specific hardware includes an air-defense and antimissile capability, in the Patriot (and, eventually in the United Arab Emirates, the more capable Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD) batteries, and other shorter-range systems, which each GCC country deploys, increasingly augmented by and linked with U.S. Patriot batteries, Navy systems, and a high-

performance U.S. TPY-2 radar in Qatar.⁴⁹ The GCC states also provide air bases available to the United States, from Oman to Kuwait, U.S. naval facilities in Bahrain and Dubai, and facilities for U.S. ground troops in Kuwait. These facilities allow the United States to sustain its naval presence and provide basing for offensive airstrike operations, complementing naval and long-range-bomber offensive capabilities. The air-defense and antiballistic-missile network defends the region against Iranian missile and air attacks. The air, naval, and ground forces of the Gulf states further enhance the GCC's defensive capability. Britain and France also sometimes station significant naval and air assets in the Gulf. Farther away from Iran itself, Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq all provide air and, in the case of Egypt, naval access and transit in support of U.S. or other allied options.⁵⁰

Politically, the GCC, Turkey, Jordan, and to some degree various other Arab states can be mobilized to support the U.S. position vis-à-vis Iran. Turkey is the only nearby regional state with ground forces and air power capable of challenging Iran, and the country's Incirlik Air Base could support U.S. Gulf operations. While Iraq, led by a Shiite coalition with ties to Iran, is the weakest link in this picture, its rapidly growing oil exports objectively are one of the major assets in constraining Iran, as they have helped balance the sanctions-generated drop in Iranian exports.⁵¹ In Israel, the United States has a special partner in the Iran game, capable on its own of striking hard at Tehran, but nonetheless with vulnerabilities.

The strong regional alliance assembled to deal with Iran is complemented by various global U.S. partners. NATO has agreed to deploy a theaterwide antimissile system with the primary purpose of defending against an Iranian missile attack, with a TPY-2 radar in Turkey.⁵² The IAEA Board of Governors and the IAEA executive leadership under Director-General Yukiya Amano have significantly toughened the investigative effort aimed at Iran. Furthermore, the board since 2006 has repeatedly, and by overwhelming majorities, referred the Iran file to the UN Security Council. The Council itself has passed five substantive resolutions against Iran, with ever tougher sanctions, since 2006.⁵³ The EU has become an effective sanctions partner, banning in 2012 any import of Iranian oil, and the EU's foreign policy high representative, Lady Ashton, takes the lead in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran. These actions, especially the Security Council's legally binding Chapter VII decisions, help legitimize U.S. and other actions that go beyond the Council's sanctions. What unites these otherwise disparate countries and organizations is a deep international commitment to nonproliferation and a consensus that no one

state, particularly one with an agenda like Iran's, should dominate the volatile Middle East. Various countries are likewise concerned about the stability of oil markets, and many, including Russia and China, worry about the global threat of radical, politicized Islam, including the Iranian variety. While Russia and China have at times dragged their heels, both are concerned about the credibility of the Security Council once it undertakes Chapter VII decisions with Iran.⁵⁴ Finally, Russia traditionally has had concerns about the hollowing out of the nonproliferation regime.⁵⁵

This informal alliance is a potent multiplier in the service of U.S. Iran policy, but as noted before, Iran has means to counter it. Hizballah, with its ability to dominate Lebanon and deluge Israel with rockets, is by far Iran's most potent ally. Although previously a second major asset to Iran, with its Arab leadership claims and strong conventional forces with "tie down" potential against Israel, Syria—given the challenge to Bashar al-Assad's rule—has now become a major threat to Tehran, as evidenced by Iran's extraordinary and publicly admitted efforts to keep Assad in power.⁵⁶ Still, Iran's efforts, even if supported to some degree by China and Russia, may not be enough. One reason for the limited direct involvement of the United States and others in the Syrian conflict is fear of day-after scenarios, referring most particularly to Iraq post-2003 and Afghanistan post-1989. All the same, it must not be forgotten that the fall of Saddam Hussein and the retreat of the Soviets from Afghanistan were regional game changers. The aftermath was bad, and could have been managed better, but the end of Saddam and the Red Army in Afghanistan were strategically worthwhile accomplishments. The same would apply to Assad's demise.

Iran also can deploy various military, terrorist, economic, and political levers in both Iraq and Afghanistan, although U.S. clout in both countries remains considerable. Iran's off-and-on success in securing overflights across Iraq to deliver arms to Syria is a good example of Iran's influence.⁵⁷ The limits of Iranian influence, meanwhile, are demonstrated by Iraq's exporting ever more crude oil, thus helping keep prices down, cooperating with the UN on the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)—an Iranian opposition group—and purchasing vast quantities of U.S. weapons. Iraq, given its oil wealth, therefore offers no less of an opportunity than Syria for the United States to exploit to counter Iran. But, more generally, the Middle East remains a volatile, violence-prone, religion-driven region where sudden outbursts against the United States and the West can occur at any time, as seen in September 2012, and Iran objectively benefits from this possibility. Iran also seeks to mobilize the region's considerable Shiite minorities, from the Gulf and Iraq through Yemen, as

allies in a possible struggle against Sunni regimes that could vastly complicate U.S. policy, as seen with Bahrain.

Other U.S. friends and allies, while generally pluses, also present vulnerabilities. As noted before, Anthony Cordesman and others have pointed out the vulnerability the Gulf states all would share in the face of an onslaught of Iranian missiles, despite their efforts to increase antimissile capabilities. Again, as Cordesman notes, were these states, fearing strikes on their infrastructure, to deny the United States the use of Gulf air bases and other facilities for offensive operations, the Americans would be hard-pressed in any conventional exchange with Iran. Israel provides Iran with a convenient regional *bête noire* to mobilize the Muslim “street,” and Israel’s policies and much of the region’s rejection of Israel’s right even to exist contribute potently to regional popular dislike of the United States, as Israel’s protector. Furthermore, Israel’s understandably different calculus of the Iranian nuclear threat sets a very high standard in Tel Aviv’s eyes for what passes as success in dealing with the Iranian threat.

Finally, Iran views the emerging nations of the twenty-first century, and organizations such as the Nonaligned Movement, as ever more effective counterweights to the United States, the West, and even the UN Security Council and the IAEA. Its accommodation to Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the 2010 Tehran Research Reactor deal⁵⁸ and the hoopla with which it greeted the Nonaligned Movement’s 2012 summit in Tehran—as well as the movement’s resulting unanimous support for a pro-Iranian nuclear resolution⁵⁹—underscore this tendency, which is reinforced by many Iranian leaders’ belief that the United States and the West are declining powers.

ROLE OF THE IRANIAN POPULATION

After the violent putdown of the Iranian popular uprising in 2009–2010, the role of the Iranian population in any confrontation with Iran is difficult to ascertain. A 2011 Rand Corporation poll noted that while almost 50 percent of Iranians strongly oppose seeking nuclear weapons, more than 30 percent strongly support the move. Almost 90 percent of those polled backed establishing civilian nuclear energy. As for whether or not to open relations with the United States, the poll revealed an almost even split.⁶⁰ These findings are discouraging enough. But a sober assessment by expert Ray Takeyh of the inability of popular action or alternative political visions to challenge the ever more totalitarian hold of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei documents

further the difficulty of relying on a popularly driven challenge to the current regime. Since 2009, he writes, an alienated population has faced an increasingly autocratic ruling elite. Further complicating the situation is the regime's inability to sustain its legitimacy based on oil-fueled economic success. While this suggestion could point to a possible uprising, his conclusion is that the Islamic Republic "will hang on" as a theocracy or populist democracy, as long as Ayatollah Khamenei remains in power. Afterward, however, his system "will not easily endure."⁶¹ This appraisal, given other data and the polls already cited, suggests that popular pressure is unlikely to change core policies, some of which (e.g., opposition to dealing with America, nuclear energy programs despite sanctions, even to some degree nuclear weapons) appear supported by significant slices of the population.

To be sure, the alienation of the Iranian population from the current regime and its policies will grow as oil-fueled economic success continues to turn into hardship. The regime will face great difficulties enduring after Khamenei passes from the scene.⁶² But it would be inappropriate to base U.S. policy on such an event or any "people power" alternative to the current regime, because those prospects are too uncertain in the short term.

NOTES

1. For the full transcript of Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2012, see <http://www.algemeiner.com/2012/09/27/full-transcript-prime-minister-netanyahu-speech-to-united-nations-general-assembly-2012-video/>.
2. Ibid.
3. White House, "Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly," September 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>.
4. "Full Transcript of the Third Presidential Debate," Wonkblog, *Washington Post*, October 22, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/wp/2012/10/22/the-full-transcript-of-the-third-presidential-debate/>.
5. Dafna Linzer and Joby Warrick, "U.S. Finds that Iran Halted Nuclear Arms Bid in 2003," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/03/AR2007120300846.html>.
6. "Joint Declaration by Iran, Turkey and Brazil on Nuclear Fuel, May 2010," Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/brazil/joint-declaration-iran-turkey-brazil-nuclear-fuel-may-2010/p22140>.
7. Mark Perry, "The Entebbe Option: How the U.S. Thinks Israel Might Strike Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 27, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/27/the_entebbe_option.
8. Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran, *The Iran Project* (2012), http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/IranReport_091112_FINAL.pdf, p. 10.
9. Dennis Ross, "How to Build U.S.-Israeli Coordination on Preventing an Iranian Nuclear Breakout," *Policy Watch 1985*, with Patrick Clawson and David Makovsky (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 25, 2012), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-build-u.s.-israeli-coordination-on-preventing-an-iranian-nuclear-bre>.

10. Stephen J. Hadley, "Eight Ways to Deal with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/26/eight_ways_to_deal_with_iran?page=0,2.
11. Binyamin Netanyahu, speech to the UN General Assembly (full transcript), September 27, 2012, <http://www.algemeiner.com/2012/09/27/full-transcript-prime-minister-netanyahu-speech-to-united-nations-general-assembly-2012-video/>.
12. Kissinger, "Iran Must be President Obama's Immediate Priority," http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-iran-must-be-president-obamas-immediate-priority/2012/11/16/2edf93e4-2dea-11e2-beb2-4b4cf5087636_story.html.
13. Jeffrey H. Smith and John B. Bellinger III, "Providing a Legal Basis to Attack Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/providing-legal-basis-attack-iran/p29173>.
14. Stephen J. Hadley, "Eight Ways to Deal with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/26/eight_ways_to_deal_with_iran?page=0,2.
15. Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran, *The Iran Project* (2012), http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/IranReport_091112_FINAL.pdf, p. 9.
16. Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights, *Beyond Worst-Case Analysis: Iran's Likely Responses to an Israeli Preventive Strike*, Policy Notes 11 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, June 2012), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote11.pdf>.
17. James Joyner, "Bipartisan Insanity on the Iran Question," Atlantic Council, September 25, 2012.
18. Barry R. Posen, "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran," *New York Times*, February 27, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/27/opinion/27posen.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
19. Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran," *Countries at the Crossroads* (Freedom House, 2012), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2012/iran>.
20. Charles Krauthammer, "The 'Deterrence Works' Fantasy," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-the-deterrence-works-fantasy/2012/08/30/20c0a3ea-f2d8-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html.
21. Ken Pollack, "Deterring a Nuclear Iran: The Devil in the Details," Council on Foreign Relations, May 2010, p. 1, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/deterring-nuclear-iran/p22292>.
22. Ibid.
23. Anthony Cordesman, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), pp. 74, 137.
24. Patrick Clawson, *The Perfect Handshake with Iran*, Strategic Report no. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 2010), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/StrategicReport03.pdf>.
25. Michael Singh, "A Red Line Iran Would Take Seriously," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-red-line-iran-would-take-seriously/2012/10/05/97191bc0-0cb0-11e2-bd1a-b868e65d57eb_story.html.
26. Peter Alsis, Anthony Cordesman, and Adam Seitz, *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Types and Levels of Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120315_iran_ch2.pdf, pp. 10–11.
27. Elisabeth Bumiller, Eric Schmitt, and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Sends Top Iranian Leader a Warning on Strait Threat," *New York Times*, January 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/world/middleeast/us-warns-top-iran-leader-not-to-shut-strait-of-hormuz.html?pagewanted=all>.
28. Mark Mazzetti and Thom Shanker, "U.S. War Game Sees Perils of Israeli Strike against Iran," *New York Times*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/world/middleeast/united-states-war-game-sees-dire-results-of-an-israeli-attack-on-iran.html?pagewanted=all>.
29. Colin Karl Boynton, *Operations to Defeat Iranian Maritime Trade Interdiction* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2009), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA502907>; Joby Warrick, "Iran Bolsters Retaliation Capability in Persian Gulf, Experts Say," *New York Times*, July 26, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

- com/iran-bolsters-retaliation-capability-in-gulf-experts-say/2012/07/26/gJQAQuFUCX_story.html.
30. U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report on Military Power of Iran, April 2012, <http://www.fas.org/man/eprint/dod-iran.pdf>, p. 1.
 31. Anthony H. Cordesman, Alexander Wilner, Michael Gibbs, and Scott Modell, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance—Part I*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, working draft (rev. November 1, 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120221_Iran_Gulf_MilBal_ConvAsym.pdf, p. 49.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
 34. David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America’s Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), pp. 220–234, 320–338.
 35. Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights, *Beyond Worst-Case Analysis: Iran’s Likely Responses to an Israeli Preventive Strike*, Policy Notes 11 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, June 2012), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote11.pdf>, p. 8.
 36. Michael Eisenstadt and David Crist, “It’s Time to Get Tough on Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/11/its_time_to_get_tough_on_iran.
 37. Author’s personal recollection as ambassador to Iraq during that period.
 38. David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America’s Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), p. 572.
 39. Adrian Blomfield, “Israel Warns Hizbollah over Iran,” *Telegraph*, May 6, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/9249171/Israel-warns-Hizbollah-over-Iran.html>; in 2010, a Pentagon official was quoted in the New York Times regarding Hizbollah’s arsenal and flow of arms: see Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, “U.S. Strains to Stop Arms Flow,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/07wikileaks-weapons.html?pagewanted=all>.
 40. Dina Smeltz, *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012) p. 29, http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2012_CCS_Report.pdf.
 41. “On Eve of Foreign Debate, Growing Pessimism about Arab Spring Aftermath,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 18, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/10/18/on-eve-of-foreign-debate-growing-pessimism-about-arab-spring-aftermath/>.
 42. Patrick Clawson, “Will Iran Weather the Economic Storm?” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/11/will_iran_weather_the_economic_storm?page=0,1.
 43. Central Intelligence Agency, “Iran,” *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>; “Iran and Its Currency Crisis: A Comeback for the Reformers?” *Economist*, October 13, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21564607?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d>.
 44. Ben Van Heuvelen and Staff, “Analysis: Iraq, the World’s New Oil Powerhouse?” *Iraq Oil Report*, September 13, 2012, <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/oil/production-exports/analysis-iraq-the-worlds-new-oil-powerhouse-8698/>.
 45. “Iran and Its Currency Crisis: A Comeback for the Reformers?” *Economist*, October 13, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21564607?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d>.
 46. Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions* (Congressional Research Service, October 15, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>, p. 53.
 47. “Turning Iran’s Currency Crisis into a Revolution,” *Bloomberg*, October 7, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-07/turning-iran-s-currency-crisis-into-a-revolution.html>; Central Intelligence Agency, “Iran,” *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

48. Glen Carey, "Saudi King Abdullah Calls for Closer Arab Union at GCC Summit," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-12-20/saudi-king-abdullah-calls-for-closer-arab-union-at-gcc-summit.html>.
49. Anthony H. Cordesman, Alexander Wilner, Michael Gibbs, and Scott Modell, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance—Part I*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, working draft (rev. November 1, 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120221_Iran_Gulf_MilBal_ConvAsym.pdf, p. 161; see also Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, "Pentagon Bulks Up Defenses in the Gulf," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2012.
50. Ibid.
51. Ben Van Heuvelen and Staff, "Analysis: Iraq, the World's New Oil Powerhouse?" *Iraq Oil Report*, September 13, 2012, <http://www.iraqoilreport.com/oil/production-exports/analysis-iraq-the-worlds-new-oil-powerhouse-8698/>.
52. Agence France-Presse, "NATO Decides to Activate Shield Despite Russian Threats," May 20, 2012, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/05/20/nato-decides-to-activate-missile-shield-despite-russian-threats/>.
53. Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions* (Congressional Research Service, October 15, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>, p. 26.
54. Rick Gladstone, "Friction at the UN as Russia and China Veto Another Resolution on Syria Sanctions," *New York Times*, July 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/world/middleeast/russia-and-china-veto-un-sanctions-against-syria.html?_r=0.
55. James E. Doyle, "Nuclear Proliferation Dangers in the NIS: An Interim Assessment," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 11, no. 3 (spring 1993), http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/02-2_Doyle.pdf, p. 241; Graham Allison, "Nuclear Disorder: Surveying Atomic Threats," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January/February 2010).
56. Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; James Reynolds, "Why Assad's Fall Would Diminish Iran's Power," BBC, July 31, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19059959>.
57. Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
58. "Joint Declaration by Iran, Turkey and Brazil on Nuclear Fuel, May 2010," Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/brazil/joint-declaration-iran-turkey-brazil-nuclear-fuel-may-2010/p22140>.
59. Sixteenth Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Nonaligned Movement, "Tehran Declaration: The Declaration of the XVI Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement," August 2012, pp. 5–6, <http://nam.gov.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=6d1ea997-6620-465d-881c-e4f64970415b>.
60. Sara Beth Elson and Alireza Nader, *What Do Iranians Think? A Survey of Attitudes on the United States, the Nuclear Program, and the Economy* (Rand Corporation, 2011), p. 12.
61. Ray Takeyh, "Why Iran Can't Follow China's Lead," *New York Times*, October 11, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/opinion/why-iran-cant-follow-chinas-lead.html?_r=0.
62. Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

POLICY OPTIONS

THE UNITED STATES, in accordance with both its traditional global and regional policy objectives, has made containing and deterring Iran, at times to the point of combat, a major regional priority. The most important operational goal is to block Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, but the U.S. agenda also includes confronting Iranian support for terror and counterbalancing Iran's influence in the Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Levant. Various U.S. global goals—preventing proliferation, combating terror, promoting regional alliances, preventing the rise of regional hegemony, and supporting democratic, liberal polities—are of course in play in the U.S. confrontation with Iran. U.S. policy in this regard has almost unanimous regional support, and broad although not complete international acceptance as well.

Given the relevance of U.S. Iran policy to overall U.S. global goals, and the reality of the Iranian threat to regional stability, core U.S. policy objectives, as noted earlier, are highly unlikely to change. Alternative scenarios, such as largely ignoring the "Iranian problem," allowing regional powers to take the lead in dealing with it, or working out a condominium with Iran to jointly secure regional peace, offer little hope of improving security in the region or buttressing U.S. global conflict management. Iran is simply too strong and threatening, its security interests too much at odds with American interests or those of most of the region, its challenge to international norms too blatant, especially on WMD and terrorism, and regional forces too weak and divided, for any alternative to strong American leadership to work. So the question is not *whether* the United States deals with the Iran problem, but *how*.

REGIME CHANGE

The inventory of possible ways to deal with this problem starts with a major military operation designed to overthrow the regime and build a new nation compatible with U.S. and international norms. This is in contrast to defensive military moves, or limited armed retaliation. Rather, such a military operation would resemble, at a minimum, that in Iraq in 2003, with potentially far greater costs and risks. For all intents and purposes, therefore, this option is ruled out.

The alternative nation-building option is regime change through tools ranging from (1) covert operations, military and nonmilitary support to insurgents, and international or unilateral sanctions to (2) democracy programs, international governmental, media, and public opinion mobilization, propaganda operations, and various sorts of political support for opposition circles. The goal here would be to effect a profound change in the orientation of the state. Underlying this objective is an assumption that the people of country X (in this case, Iran), if they could only be freed from dictatorship and decide their country's policies themselves, would opt for policies compatible with those of the United States. Much can be debated about this option, but certain realities should inform any discussion. In particular, regime change has occurred but rarely, at least rarely with outcomes favorable to the West, with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe being one of the few examples. That regime change, however, occurred largely for reasons internal to that system, not outside pressure alone.

The first question when applying this policy is how ripe a given regime is to dramatic change. While the Iranian government and state system are not particularly popular, as noted in the previous section, few signs indicate it will fall to an uprising, whether violent or peaceful. The Iranian state's strong, violent, and ultimately successful response to the 2009–2010 “Green revolution,” and its previous endurance during the Iran-Iraq War, demonstrates its resilience. Iran experts Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett recently made this point quite convincingly.¹

A second question, assuming a regime is vulnerable to change, involves what an outside state can do to enhance that possibility. In the case of Iran, however, most of the tools in the usual regime change quiver are unavailable. The United States does not have the entrée into senior political or security circles to carry out a regime change by coup, as it did with Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq in the early 1950s. Nor does it have the sort of well-organized, popularly supported opposition forces that were available with the Iraqi National Congress in the 1990s (but which in the end were insufficient to overthrow Saddam absent an American invasion).

A final context for considering a policy of regime change is the interplay of that policy with other policies related to the state in question, or even with certain global norms. The UN Charter, implicitly, and the UN General Assembly and the International Court, explicitly, have endorsed the prohibition of one sovereign state interfering in the domestic affairs of any other sovereign state.² Moreover, the United States pledged in the 1981 Algiers Accords, to gain the

release of U.S. hostages from the Iranian embassy, “that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran’s internal affairs.”³ Given these statutes, pursuing regime change actively would require Washington to forswear policies and tactics related to Iran that rely on international support, and accept some measure of international opprobrium. Given the success and importance of the current anti-Iranian international coalition, this would be a major cost. To conclude, absent incontrovertible evidence that Iran is ripe for a new international orientation, and that the United States can materially affect such a change, the downsides of such a policy argue that regime change be left aside.

A policy of regime change differs from one in which the United States deliberately generates a serious threat to the regime’s stability. Many analysts believe that the current Iranian leadership will not blink on the nuclear issue,⁴ or curb its expansionistic drive in other ways, unless it feels that continuing its aggressive nuclear and external policies will put its survival at risk. Serious economic sanctions, of the sort the United States is just getting into with Iran, and a credible threat of major military action against the nuclear and other power-projection elements of the Iranian state, could induce that conviction. But attempting to modulate U.S. policies to generate a sense of threat, while encouraging Iran to believe that a change in its own policies will allay the outside pressure, is not easy. For example, stated U.S. policy “for a responsible Iran,” such as in the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy, pillories Iran not only for its hegemonic nuclear, regional, and terrorist policies but also for “denying its citizens universal rights.”⁵ Such language is likely to feed the regime’s belief that the United States is out to overthrow the regime because of what it is, not what it does, and thus block tactical compromises.

RAPPROCHEMENT

Another game-changing approach, considered, as noted, by all U.S. administrations to varying degrees since 1979, is rapprochement through outreach, bilateral exchanges, talks, and ties. This strategic approach should not be confused with tactical exchanges with Tehran, be they on military deconfliction, the nuclear issue, or specific issues involving U.S. or Iranian citizens, economic or cultural interests, natural catastrophes, and the like. The latter are intended to help us—or both sides—manage one or another aspect of the bilateral struggle. Rapprochement, meanwhile, aims at transcending the struggle itself. Daniel Brumberg and Barry Blechman, for example, writing in *Foreign Policy* in December 2010, urged that détente with the Islamic Republic

be made a top priority. That, they argue, would undercut the threat that ultra-hardline Iranian officials regularly invoke to legitimate their efforts to pummel or isolate their internal critics.⁶

The most influential recent thinkers and practitioners of Track II diplomacy, former undersecretary of state Thomas Pickering and former ambassador Bill Luers, offer a comprehensive approach that encapsulates many of the principles of this school of thought.⁷ Drawing on the Nixonian approach to China, they posit that Iran's wants include recognition of its revolution; acceptance of its nuclear program; the departure of the United States from the Middle East; and the lifting of sanctions. U.S. wants include opposition to Iranian ownership of nuclear weapons and threats to Israel, the boosting of democracy, and support for access to the region's oil and gas. In Pickering and Luers's view, both Iran and the United States want stability in the region, the reincorporation of Iran into the international community, and no war. While the two thinkers do not recommend adoption of the entire Iranian agenda, and draw up a reasonable nuclear compromise, their advocacy of a U.S. regional condominium with Iran is akin to almost granting Iran a *droit de regard* over regional issues.

The problem with this approach is that Iran is not China; it is more aggressive internationally, and sometimes behaves irrationally, as in the 2011 plan to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States. Furthermore, Iran is not needed to balance a much greater threat, as China did the Soviet Union, and it is not the undisputed emerging Goliath of its region, as China was even back in the 1970s. Taken together, Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, and the Gulf States have populations well over four times that of Iran, and these states have much greater riches in gross domestic product and hydrocarbons, and in most cases seriously divergent geostrategic and religious interests.

And of course there remains the problem of negotiating with the Iranians on any agenda. Pickering and Luers recognize the problem, but their solution is for the United States to keep trying harder. The Supreme Leader, they argue accurately, is not ready for talks: "Instead, he is convinced that the United States will not work with Iran until his regime is gone." Rather than attribute this stance to a wildly divergent worldview, they argue that it owes at least in part to the "malign influence" of past American mistakes that must be dealt with. Khamenei is suspicious, so it will take American "actions, not just messages" to persuade him of Washington's desire for better relations. The actions should include curbing international pressure and covert operations. But even if the United States followed Pickering and Luers'

advice, there is no guarantee that talks would even get to first base. Somehow, somewhere, the United States, in the eyes of the Iranians, always gets it wrong, despite American success over decades in dealing with other difficult states. Often it never becomes apparent exactly how things go wrong, but occasionally there is feedback. For example, Hossein Mousavian asserts that the Supreme Leader rejected President Obama's letters because the latter was "supporting" the Green Movement.⁸

At bottom, the approach embraced by Pickering and Luers rests on the assumption that any conflict is largely either the result of misunderstanding; poor or nonexistent communication; an absence of trust; or, otherwise, the United States pursuing the wrong policies. To be sure, the first three factors exist and exacerbate the U.S.-Iran conflict, but those factors are not its genesis; rather, they are the result of clashing worldviews. Add to that the practical difficulties both the United States and Iran have in speaking with one authoritative voice given domestic considerations, and the overwhelming problems with this approach become apparent—as the priority to communication and attempting to establish trust entails attention to words and feelings at the expense of tough decisions.

To conclude, communications for tactical clarity, resolution of solvable secondary issues, and confidence building are all fine pursuits. An overall policy posited on rapprochement through communications (and often one-sided concessions) is not fine. It undercuts necessary tougher actions, confuses the other side, and eventually could sacrifice a more promising strategy for the chimera of change through talk. The United States should be ready to talk if the Iranians show a real interest in doing so, but it should not sacrifice anything significant to pursue rapprochement absent a change of Iranian heart.

CONFRONTING IRAN

If forcing a deep shift in Iran's worldview is unlikely through measures ranging from regime change to rapprochement, and short of invasion and occupation, then the United States is left with a policy of managing an ambitious and dangerous state by confronting its aggressive and objectionable actions. Despite rhetorical gestures in other directions, this has been the underlying policy of the United States and international community for the past thirty years. The policy has not succeeded in changing Iran's innate hostility to international norms, nor in halting Iran's efforts to expand its power, most notably through attaining a nuclear weapons capability. However, it has stymied Iranian gambits (in particular, through the Tanker War in the late 1980s), inflicted very

heavy costs on the Iranian economy (especially with the most recent sanctions), forged an ever better-coordinated alliance among the United States, regional states, and the larger global community, and challenged the Iranian regional position in the Syrian civil war. Even though Iran is surviving, and doing so without seemingly shifting its worldview and ambitions inimical to regional stability, it certainly is not *winning* any race for regional hegemony, as the recent shift in Turkey's position, from relatively benign neighbor to regional competitor, demonstrates.⁹

So far, so good. But this policy of management has its own shortcomings. It does not guarantee that the problem goes away, treating it instead, in medical terms, like high blood pressure or diabetes rather than a tumor to be excised. As with those former conditions, the Iranian "condition" can grow worse, threatening the regional body, and Israel in particular. Israel's willingness to live with a threatening Iran is thus a major issue in any confrontation strategy, given the influence Israel has on U.S. policy and given Israel's considerable unilateral military and other abilities to confront Iran. While Israel itself cannot "excise" the Iranian tumor, it can take offensive action that may be reasonably assumed to draw in the United States, which can do the surgery.

A second challenge involves the tolerance of regional states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, for a policy that does not "crush the head of the snake."¹⁰ At some point, the United States would face the risk that those countries would either attempt action on their own or work out some sort of regional condominium almost certainly disadvantageous to the U.S. position on Iran. A more muscular approach aimed at threatening regime survival, as sketched out earlier, could help here. Finally, as always with any long-term effort to control a threat, the danger exists either of a miscalculation that could throw the region into chaos—for example, a Turkish-Iranian clash over the latter's support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—or a Saudi-Iranian military exchange off Bahrain. Other possibilities include Iran's development of closer ties with Iraq or the reconstitution of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah alliance now in disarray.

Those advocating a confrontation policy must thus spell out specifically how they would deal with these inherent risks associated with their strategy. The United States, for example, has such a long list of complaints against Iran—ranging from nuclear weapons to the regime's clamping down on freedom of expression—that Iranian leaders understandably may fear that Americans are out to transform their entire society. U.S. operational policy itself suffers from a lack of priorities. In a world of limited resources, managing Iran's

threats with maximum clarity will help everyone, in America, in Iran, and around the world, understand what the United States really will not countenance and help Washington allocate resources.

Furthermore, as with the containment strategy applied to the Soviet Union, confronting Iran does not mean using a passive containment tactic for every gambit by the other side. “Rollback of Communism,” while never the overarching U.S. Cold War strategy, was the response to specific actions such as the invasion of South Korea and the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. Such a policy aimed at resisting adventures and thereby restoring a balance is appropriate for Iran, on both the nuclear account and some of Iran’s unconventional and terrorist activities.

Finally, a strong, stable alliance system, the threat to prevent a nuclear weapons breakout, and ever tougher sanctions could challenge the regime in a way that forces it to change course. This tracks with the thinking of analysts such as Ray Takeyh and Ken Pollack, as noted earlier. But, again, this approach would have to be linked with extraordinary efforts to signal that the Iranian regime’s actions, not its existence, were the target of U.S. efforts toward change.

NOTES

1. Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, “Liberal Shamelessness on Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran,” *The Race for Iran* (blog), November 15, 2012, <http://www.raceforiran.com/>.
2. “The Principle of Non-Intervention in Contemporary International Law: Non-Interference in a State’s Internal Affairs Used to Be a Rule of International Law: Is It Still?” Chatham House, February 28, 2007; Charter of the United Nations, chapter I, article 2.
3. Algiers Accords, “Declaration of the Government of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria,” January 19, 1981, <http://www.iusct.net/General%20Documents/2-Claims%20Settlement%20Declaration.pdf>.
4. Ken Pollack and Ray Takeyh, “Doubling Down on Iran,” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (fall 2011), pp. 7–21, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/doubling-down-iran/p25868>.
5. White House, National Security Strategy (2010), p. 26, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
6. Daniel Brumberg and Barry Blechman, “Strategic Engagement with Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, December 14, 2010, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/12/14/strategic_engagement_with_iran.
7. William H. Luers and Thomas R. Pickering, “Envisioning a Deal with Iran,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/opinion/envisioning-a-deal-with-iran.html>.
8. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2012), p. 339.
9. Soner Cagaptay, “Next Up: Turkey versus Iran,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/15/opinion/next-up-turkey-vs-iran.html>.
10. Arshad Mohammed and Ross Colvin, “Saudi King Urged U.S. to Attack Iran: WikiLeaks,” Reuters, November 29, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/29/us-wikileaks-usaidUSTRE6AP06Z20101129>.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

THE IRANIAN REGIME'S deeply held worldview, and the hegemony-seeking policies that flow from it, contradicts the values and interests of the United States, the international community, and most of the other states in the region. The nuclear issue, albeit uniquely dangerous, is but one manifestation of this fundamental challenge to regional stability and U.S. interests.

As such, political and potentially armed conflict with the United States, as Iran carries out its global foreign policy in the Middle East, is inevitable. In fact, the United States has been engaged in a “twilight war” against Iran, to cite author David Crist, for the past thirty-plus years. This is unlikely to change.

The stakes involved in the U.S. confrontation with Iran, given the volatility and importance of the region, Iran's innate strength, and the intertwining of numerous key U.S. concerns—from nuclear nonproliferation and possible conventional conflict to oil markets to the integrity of U.S. financial leadership to UN Security Council authority and politics to Israel—make this issue the most pressing and dangerous now on the U.S. and international agenda. Considering the stakes, the manner and success of America's management of this issue will have a profound impact on international relations and U.S. global leadership.

A major military campaign to destroy Iran's forces and occupy the country is possible for the United States, but the extraordinary costs, burdens, and risks of such a campaign, even compared to the Iraq war of 2003, rule it out practically, absent some startling and dangerous direct Iranian threat to the United States that could not be dealt with otherwise.

No reliable indicators suggest that Iran is ready for a dramatic regime change that would result in a significant modification of its worldview, nor does the United States have obvious tools to effectively advance a regime-change agenda. Given these realities, and the significant costs of other policy options associated with a regime-change campaign, this option is not promising.

Likewise, nothing indicates, after thirty years of trying, that U.S. communications with, outreach to, or concessions concerning Iran will produce a rap-

prochement eliminating or easing dramatically the underlying bilateral conflict. This conclusion, and the costs of other options associated with pursuing a major rapprochement effort, argues against a rapprochement-centric Iran policy, absent a new confirmation of serious Iranian intent both to talk and to modify its strategic goals.

Barring an across-the-board change based on one or another contingency described in the preceding paragraphs, the most reasonable, “least bad” strategy for the United States and the international community consists of deterring or, if necessary, resisting Iran’s most destabilizing activities. Such a strategy also has the benefit of being consistent with U.S. global and regional goals.

CONFRONT-AND-RESIST STRATEGY

A confront-and-resist strategy should maximize the set of U.S. formal and informal alliances and weaken Iran diplomatically, politically, militarily, and economically. The informal alliance system put together in recent years by the United States and the corresponding effectiveness of international sanctions are new and extraordinarily important tools to threaten Iran. That system should not be lightly placed at risk for unilateral U.S. actions.

The strategy must be carried out with enough vigor and thus risk to both sides to convince Iran’s leaders that the set of measures adopted—from sanctions to diplomatic and military pressure to a credible prevention threat against nuclear weapons—will place its regime at eventual mortal risk absent a change of Iranian behavior. Conversely, a change in behavior for the better will result in relaxed U.S. pressure rather than increased efforts to overthrow the clerical regime. Maintaining this balance will be tricky.

Weakening Iran is an end in itself—not as a punishment, but as a response to Iran’s violations of international norms and as a means to reduce Iran’s ability to exploit its strengths, as well as to demonstrate resolve, isolate Iran from significant international players whom it could exploit, and deter Iranian adventures.

Military encounters and strikes involving Iran as an element in this confront-and-resist strategy can be justified under certain conditions in order to respond to Iranian gambits, set back nuclear capabilities, signal seriousness, and maintain regional support. Such actions would have to be carefully orchestrated to minimize the inherent, significant risk of escalation with uncertain results, along with regional and oil market chaos. But in any case,

military action aimed at Iran's nuclear capabilities (or at rolling back other Iranian initiatives) is highly unlikely to eliminate fully either Iran's capability or intent to pursue nuclear weapons. Nor is it likely to force the regime to abandon its hegemonic regional policies. Thus, military action is a complement to, not a competitor of, a confront-and-resist strategy.

The proposed confront-and-resist strategy requires prioritization, even given the immense strength of the United States, which cannot do everything, at least not intensively. And some activities (sanctions) by necessity may have an impact on others (outreach to the Iranian population).

The various strategy elements must not only be prioritized but also coordinated for unity of effort under a central U.S. government authority with daily oversight of all aspects—intelligence, diplomacy, nonproliferation, military, sanctions, energy, congressional relations. Several models for such coordination at the senior subcabinet level are available, such as the 2006 Iraq-Afghanistan czar concept; one or another should be implemented.

PREVENT POSSESSION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

At the appropriate time, in consultation with other P5+1 members, deploy the most far-reaching nuclear compromise feasible, while making clear to Iran that failure to accept this deal will be taken as a decision to reject diplomacy and press for nuclear weapons, thus risking even more serious international sanctions and U.S. action.

Such a compromise could allow Iranian enrichment at up to 3.5–5.0 percent, as long as essentially all such enriched uranium, while remaining the property of Iran, would be stored outside Iran under international observation, to be provided specifically for verified peaceful nuclear energy, research, and medical purposes. Any such compromise would require Iran's acceptance of intrusive IAEA inspections, abandoning intent to pursue weapons programs, and ratification of the Additional Protocols.

In return, the international community would have to commit to step-by-step lifting of sanctions as Iran meets the stated provisions, and eventual formal acknowledgment of its NPT rights, including enrichment and technical assistance.

Significant new sanctions beyond those in place by mid-2012 should be held in reserve rather than imposed immediately, as an incentive to promote Iranian compromise and to avoid premature rejection by some international actors.

MAINTAIN U.S. PREVENTION STRATEGY

Be prepared to take military action against nuclear facilities, suspected weapons, delivery systems, and command-and-control infrastructure if necessary, if all other measures fail to prevent Iranian possession of nuclear weapons.

The United States should not spell out diplomatically or publicly a redline or time line for such military action, but the U.S. government needs to think through what thresholds would need to be reached to trigger a crisis situation; such a situation would generate last-ditch diplomatic and other efforts short of military action, and likely lead the United States to military action if Iran does not back down. These thresholds need to be better aired publicly.

U.S. strike options should be considered with a range of desired results in mind, from warning strikes through various levels of destruction of Iran's nuclear and missile infrastructure and supporting command-and-control and defense systems.

The United States must think through carefully how to benefit from a post-strike scenario, given the likelihood that neither Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities nor its intentions will have been permanently changed, that a conventional clash could cost the Americans as well as the Iranians dearly, and that a U.S. strike could undercut international support for tough UN Security Council resolutions.

To increase confidence in the prevention strategy and help convince Iran (and Israel) that the United States is serious, Washington could do the following:

- ▶ Consider striking Iran with conventional forces, upon any incontrovertible evidence that Iran has a nuclear weapon(s), to destroy as much of Iran's nuclear and long-range missile capabilities as possible. That is, attaining a nuclear weapon would not deter, but rather trigger, U.S. military action.
- ▶ With P5+1 partners and Israel, spell out in advance what diplomatic, inspection, sanctions, and operational actions would likely be at the threshold of a strike.
- ▶ Maintain and strengthen the U.S. and allied conventional military capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat any Iranian military action in the region.
- ▶ Give stronger security guarantees in U.S.-Gulf and U.S.-Israeli military arrangements.

-
- ▶ Plan for the possibility, and signal to Iran and regional states, that the United States would respond overwhelmingly and, if required, disproportionately to Iranian military acts or provocations, including cyber. The United States must win convincingly in any resort to conventional or unconventional force.
 - ▶ Set as the number-one U.S. defense priority maintaining a naval and air presence sufficient to deter or win a conflict with Iran, despite the broader “pivot” to a focus on Asia. An armed challenge to the U.S. international security role, at least in the near future, is far more likely to arise in the Middle East than in East Asia. A U.S. failure to maintain stability and support allies in the critical region will have profoundly negative effects on the parallel U.S. security goals in East Asia and elsewhere.
 - ▶ Redouble efforts to establish tactical military-to-military communications in the Gulf area to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation.
 - ▶ Continuously strengthen the set of U.S. formal and informal alliances with the GCC and other regional states, Israel, NATO, the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, and the IAEA to support other components of the U.S. strategy and demonstrate the depth of the U.S. effort to achieve results peacefully. Weaken Iran’s alliance system.
 - ▶ Distinguish between those Iranian actions the United States finds objectionable (human rights violations, support for Syria and Hizballah, and generally anti-Western diplomatic policies) and those that the United States and presumably its international allies will oppose to the point of legally binding sanctions and military action (the quest for nuclear weapons, military intimidation of neighbors and Israel, and use of terror). These latter actions are all pursued by Iran toward its goal of achieving regional hegemony, which is the ultimate target of U.S. and international pressure.
 - ▶ Take risks to drive the Assad regime from power.
 - ▶ Keep Iraq at least neutral in the confrontation with Iran; maintaining Iraq’s internal unity and continuing its oil-export expansion are major pressure points against Iran.

- ▶ While strengthening overall regional solidarity against Iran, make clear to the region's Sunni states that the United States will not countenance the co-optation of U.S. policy to justify a degenerating Sunni-Shiite conflict. The foe is not Shia Islam but rather the expansionist leadership of Iran.
- ▶ Apply a rigorous cost-benefit analysis to any unilateral U.S. actions that could place at risk the cohesion of its present set of alliances.
- ▶ Continuously increase the economic pressure on Iran, targeting hydrocarbons trade, financial institutions, and IRGC entities.
- ▶ Enhance outreach to the Iranian population, clearly articulate American respect for both the Iranian people and Iran as a sovereign state, and constantly advocate democracy, individual freedoms, and rule of law. Make equally clear, however, that embracing these values is not a prerequisite for compromises with Iran on nuclear, regional, or military matters.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President

Martin J. Gross

Chairman

Howard P. Berkowitz

Chairmen Emeriti

Fred S. Lafer

Michael Stein

Founding President and Chairman Emerita

Barbi Weinberg

Senior Vice Presidents

Bernard Leventhal

Peter Lowy

James Schreiber

Vice Presidents

Benjamin Breslauer

Walter P. Stern

Vice President Emeritus

Charles Adler

Secretary

Richard S. Abramson

Treasurer

Dimitri Sogoloff

Board Members

Jay Bernstein

Anthony Beyer

Richard Borow

Michael Gelman

Roger Hertog, *emeritus*

Shelly Kassen

Jack Kay

Michael Keston

Moses Libitzky

Daniel Mintz

Zachary Schreiber

Fred Schwartz

John Shapiro

Merryl Tisch

Susan Wagner

Gary Wexler

BOARD OF ADVISORS

Max M. Kampelman

Henry A. Kissinger

Samuel W. Lewis

Edward Luttwak

Michael Mandelbaum

Robert C. McFarlane

Martin Peretz

Richard Perle

James G. Roche

George P. Shultz

R. James Woolsey

Mortimer Zuckerman

“THE STAKES INVOLVED IN THE U.S. CONFRONTATION WITH IRAN, GIVEN THE VOLATILITY AND IMPORTANCE OF THE REGION, IRAN’S INNATE STRENGTH, AND THE INTERTWINING OF NUMEROUS KEY U.S. CONCERNS—FROM NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION AND POSSIBLE CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT TO OIL MARKETS TO THE INTEGRITY OF U.S. FINANCIAL LEADERSHIP TO UN SECURITY COUNCIL AUTHORITY AND POLITICS TO ISRAEL—MAKE THIS ISSUE THE MOST PRESSING AND DANGEROUS NOW ON THE U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL AGENDA.”

